

## **We Must Interpret: The Hermeneutic Retrieval of the Philosophical Tradition**

*Andrzej Wiercinski in conversation with Boyd Blundell*

BB: Let us begin with our first meeting. I vividly remember that September day of 1997 in the Canada Room at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. I was a master's student, and you were a visiting fellow at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. My fellow student Sean McGrath introduced me to you at lunch, and the traditional pleasantries of such a meeting quickly gave way to a spirited exchange on the meaning of hermeneutics, continued later in your office, which seemed carefully set up for just such conversations.

AW: I love meeting people at the table. Life starts with hospitality, with making room for the other, with welcoming the stranger, who challenges us to accept him (*acceptum* from *accipere*—to receive, to accept). In Greek, ξένιος denotes a stranger, a guest, who enters into our life. Similarly, Latin *hospes* describes both a guest and a host, and *hostis* can refer to guest or enemy. In everyday life it is not always easy to make a distinction between hostile and hospitable strangers. But everybody who is coming into our life calls for hospitality, care, and compassion. Therefore, I understand a main task of human life as the hermeneutics of hospitality. And a particular instance of that hospitality is sharing a meal. When you share food with the stranger and provide him with the ingredients you use to prepare a meal for yourself so that he can create out of those components his own dish, you follow the ancient tradition of hospitality. It seems vital to me to respect the otherness of the other by sharing your world with him in a manner, in which he is not overwhelmed but feels invited by the possibility of a new discovery. Like in our case in the Canada Room, two strangers, you and I falling into a conversation on Gadamer became host and guest *to each other*. And this primary dialectics of host and guest continues to inspire our life.

BB: Let us go back to the beginning. Tell me a little about your earliest formation, both intellectual and personal.

AW: I was born in Bialystok in Eastern Poland in the close vicinity to White Russia. At first, I was educated by my mother, who as a World War II child started her career as a teacher after graduating from a Teacher's College and spent the rest of her professional life studying. My sister (now a professor of medicine at the Medical University of Warsaw) and I spent our childhood surrounded by books. What unforgettable moments! I used to read and tell her stories, as we were often alone as children, sometimes for whole days, and we lived in an enchanted fairy-tale realm. This powerful training of my imagination crucially influenced my way of living. Till this day, the most pleasurable thing in my life is the joy in exercising my imagination.

I vividly remember long walks on Sundays to the local church and my poor father was often challenged to carry both of us on his shoulders. Maybe it is from that experience that I grew to love walking.

As a teenager I would sit with my mother through the long nights, helping her however I could when she was finishing her thesis in pedagogy. We worked together on many different academic projects. I was mesmerized by the variety of educational concepts, which I gradually began to understand. I was so fascinated by the task, which was quite overwhelming for a teenager, but it was so much more interesting than the standard education I was getting at school. When I read the history of education—it seemed to me then that it was a huge volume—I was convinced that there is nothing more fascinating in life than studying. At first, it was at night because that was the only time we could do it together; it was only later that I discovered that there is something truly magical in working long nights. This magic of deciphering meaning, particularly at night, does still inspire me tremendously and as you well know I often admire the glimmering of dawn showing up just above the horizon before going to bed.

Since my mother was my first teacher, I never developed the sense that a teacher is a stranger or an oppressor. I very early discovered an affinity for teachers who are passionate about teaching. In high school I met a literature teacher who became my conversation partner. At some point I tutored her daughter in mathematics and other natural sciences, and once everybody went to bed we would go to her study and read poetry together. This went on for a few years. With Novalis, I can say that they were years of life enrichment through the formation of heart (*Lebensbereicherung durch Herzensbildung*). And there was also local youth theatre, which was my passion along with literature and particularly poetry.

BB: It is amazing how early these passions can develop, and the importance of those early teachers in awakening them. From there, I believe, you went on to the Catholic University of Lublin. How did this influence your further thinking?

AW: My intellectual outlook has been focused on interdisciplinary education in an international setting, and this began at the Catholic University of Lublin. Thinking beyond the boundaries of any particular discipline and the confines of any particular culture or language (Latin and Greek, Polish and Russian, German and English, Italian and Spanish) became as much my academic task as my *modus vivendi*.

In my early studies of philosophy and theology in Lublin, I learned to appreciate the *art* of thinking. I followed with great interest how phenomenology challenged the predominant view of the famous Lublin school of existential Thomism. One needs to be faithful and progressive. In Greek, this tension is expressed by two verbs, *προάγω*, which means leading forward, and *μένω*, meaning remaining, abiding. Education is a process of going forth from a place in which our view of the world remains somewhat hidden. But it would be naïve to think that what is hidden does not belong to the whole. When we go toward the sun we cannot look straight at its brightness. Getting blinded by the sun gives us a chance to look at the surface of things and discover the beauty of what we often fail to see at eye level. This is what Heidegger means by *ἀλήθεια* as disclosure, which always also entails closure. Hence, education happens in the tension between unconcealment (*Entbergung*) and concealment (*Verbergung*).

BB: It seems that this view of education is a bit grim, with one running in place, learning some things while forgetting others.

AW: There is a kind of progress, which is a sheer will to advance in terms of simple rupture and discontinuity of tradition. Adhering to tradition does not mean being enslaved by the past. Rather, real progress requires a conscientiously being rooted, which, in turn, calls for a creative interpretation of belonging to tradition and what it means to remain the same person in an ever changing existential personal horizon. Throwing away or selling one's antiques will not make you a less historical being, even if you are acclaimed fashionable by those who dictate trends. Since there cannot be a formal definition of the limit, the question of how far can we go calls for permanent interpretation, far beyond what is commonly considered stylish, right, or proper.

BB: Back to Lublin for a moment. Who were your primary influences there?

AW: One of the most captivating persons for me was Pater Mieczyslaw Albert Krapiec, OP. One of the requirements for my doctorate in philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin was to pass the comprehensive examination in metaphysics with Pater Krapiec. He knew that I had studied in Freiburg and my dissertation was ready. He asked me to walk with him from his apartment at his monastery at Zlota 9 to the University and we had an engaging conversation on the wide spectrum of the history of philosophy. Walking Krakowskie Przedmieście toward Aleje Raclawickie, we navigated between Aquinas and Heidegger with frequent references to Christian Wolff and Hegel. When we finally approached the University he asked me if I have the examination form from the Department for him to sign. I handed him the form and he signed it and gave me the highest mark. That's it? I asked. Yes, he answered, adding that philosophy is the *art* of conversation.

Some days later I learned that he would be one of the reviewers of my dissertation. When he saw me next, he asked me if I could come over the next day at 7.30 am to his monastery. This marked the beginning of an exciting journey through

the history of metaphysics. Pater Krapiec never used my last or first name, but always addressed me as “colleague” (*collega*—partner in a business). He welcomed me at 7.30 sharp with an espresso and suggested that we should read my dissertation together. It took us a good two weeks to go through my manuscript. Whenever we were reading passages regarding Gustav Siewerth, he would often ask me very specific questions, going far beyond the aspects I discussed in my book. It was an extremely intense conversation, particularly with reference to its contrast with the Gilsonian version of reading Aquinas. I treasure this experience; it was one of my most exciting and stimulating *privatissima*, a true intellectual friendship and search for understanding of the matter which needs to be understood. It was obvious that our conversation would end up in an unresolved controversy, but I learned to appreciate the generosity of my conversational partner. Yes, despite the obvious asymmetry—he was in the end the reviewer of my dissertation—I felt welcomed as a partner in a conversation. And I can say that even the asymmetry of this encounter did not hinder us in enriching our understanding of the possibilities of interpreting medieval philosophy in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. The intellectual achievement contributed to a new personal relationship.

There was one more challenging experience with Pater Krapiec during my doctoral exam. As it is customary we discussed three major areas for the exam. Since one of my reviewers was German, the whole doctoral exam happened in German. When it came to Pater Krapiec’s turn, he started to talk about Aristotle, even though it was not the area we had agreed upon, and all of a sudden we were into a new topic that interested both of us. The exam was not a chance to demonstrate his intellectual superiority, but rather a common task to understand something that really matters. And since talking about Aristotle and the Absolute mattered, the formal arrangements seemed quite irrelevant.

In Lublin, I deepened my appreciation of medieval philosophy, particularly represented by the late Prof. Marian Kurdzialek, a connoisseur of everything old and precious—especially cigars and cognacs—and my doctoral supervisor in philosophy, Prof. Stanislaw Wielgus, the present Archbishop emeritus of Warsaw. The hermeneutic rehabilitation of the Middle Ages became the focal point of my philosophical work. The awareness of the importance of the study of the history of philosophy and the development of philosophical ideas accompany my hermeneutic project. *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, historically effected consciousness, the key Gadamerian concept, illuminates the contingency of our thinking and of our philosophical traditions. Thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Gustav Siewerth, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Hans Urs von Balthasar were deeply influenced by the medieval tradition. They creatively and constructively transformed this tradition while reinterpreting it in the horizon of concrete contemporary concerns.

BB: I can see that virtually every theme you have explored academically is already present in your undergraduate work. What did you first concentrate on in your graduate work?

AW: My personal intellectual journey centers around the facticity of Dasein and the finitude of human thinking, thus developing a deeper grasping of the prejudices that condition our own way of understanding of that which needs to be understood. The hermeneutics of Dasein emphasizes the importance of the enactment sense of our life (*Vollzug des Lebens*). Heidegger stressed an inviolable primordial proximity between *Vollzug des Lebens* and knowledge. Knowledge always refers to the enactment of life; in fact; the enactment of life, in turn, makes knowledge possible. To close the circle, knowledge is a *knowing of* the enactment of life. Prof. Czesław Bartnik in Lublin, the supervisor of my Master's thesis on Gadamer, encouraged me to think hermeneutically with a great sensitivity to the centrality of the human person. I was fortunate to walk with him virtually every day after lunch and/or dinner for many years and talk. It was truly a peripatetic experience (*περιπατητικός* referring to the act of walking). In fact, *περιπατέω* means not only to walk, but to progress, to make one's way. It is the Greek analogue to the Hebrew notion of living. In sun and rain, hot and cold, light and darkness, we wandered, falling into conversation. And I mean falling; not discussing this or that particular subject but falling into a play that overcame us. There is nothing artificial about falling into this play. On the contrary, the event of play pulls us into it. Instinctively we know that what really matters is not an understanding of any particular issue, but an insight into our concrete life. What is at stake is not so much an intellectual discovery, but a discovery of our very being.

BB: When I first met you in 1997, our conversations, our free play, was as much about poetry and translation as it was about philosophy or theology. How far back does your love of poetry go?

AW: I have always been very influenced by literature, especially poetry and drama. Studying philosophy and theology at first meant a break with my involvement in theatre. But very soon I learned that literature would remain a focal point of my intellectual journey. Through my literary contacts in Lublin I was able to advance in my studies of literature. Professors Irena Sławińska, Czesław Zgorzelski, Stefan Sawicki, Jerzy Świąch, and Maria Jasińska-Wojtkowska were foremost in the long list of my inspiring interlocutors. I should also mention a fellow student, Alfred Marek Wierzbicki, who was three years ahead of me. Alfred and I read poetry together and lived a life of what was for me unprecedented intellectual intensity. In my first days in Lublin I befriended Janusz Nagórny, my future professor in moral theology. How often I left him frustrated when after a sleepless night passionately discussing literature I would say yes, but. . . . Only slowly have I learned to understand that this ambiguity was not just youthful caprice, but a way of thinking, which slowly led to my intellectual and personal maturation. I was blessed to have Jan Sochoń as a neighbor in Wasilków. He was already a doctoral student in literature when we began to study theology together, he in Warsaw and I in Lublin. Our intellectual and personal support for each other continues to this day.

In Warsaw, I made yet another discovery: Prof. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb. Himself a priest, a poet, a professor of the history of art, he became a companion on

my way, a fellow connoisseur of life in all its richness and beauty. I interpret “connoisseur,” by going beyond a traditional understanding of *connaître*, meaning to be acquainted with or to know somebody or something. To know somebody or something for me involves becoming close, intimate with someone or something. In Polish, friendship (*przyjaźń*) means to be close to somebody (*przy-jaźni*), close to the consciousness (*jaźń*) of the other.

BB: As a poet, what genres of literature have influenced you the most?

AW: From early on I sensed something profoundly suspicious in the traditional distinction between nature and culture and the intellectual dismissal of the messy business of living. I was lucky to live in the aura of Witold Gombrowicz who sensitized me to the essential conflict of an individual with culture and society, as real in his lifetime as in mine. Being an aristocrat, Gombrowicz often dreamt of having an affair with someone from the lower classes, just to be re-awakened to life. He was a master of decisiveness. He always got what he wanted, although very often the hard way. He was so obsessed with living life, never allowing himself to get really frustrated or intimidated by what was expected from him or even imposed on him by culture and society. For him, there was nothing more pathetic than trying to wrap oneself in the mantle of a political and cultural controversy and pretend that “high culture” will save people and nations. There is nothing unworthy in life, nothing unworthy of being explored and lived to the fullest. Life calls for being explored, for distrusting all forms, for questioning all meaning. What is so very compelling in Gombrowicz is the fact that this fundamental questioning happens not only in words but also in blood. Gombrowicz’s radical ambiguity is a powerful gesture toward welcoming life as it comes, with all its joy and ridicule, with the steadfast hope that on the ruins of the old a new church arises, the interhuman church *of the Form*.

BB: You were not only a poet and a philosopher, but also a priest. Can you tell us a bit about your early priestly work?

AW: Following my graduation and ordination in Lublin, I had a number of pastoral assignments. I loved teaching, even when it was exhausting. My last teaching assignment was in Nałęczów, a fashionable resort in the vicinity of Lublin. There I taught students at the College for Painting. We studied Chagall’s stained glass, read Plato’s poetic visions, and disputed like scholastics. I was also privileged to work with prisoners, intellectuals, and artists. In fact, being the moderator of the pastoral care of artists was my last formal pastoral assignment. I have always been fascinated by the notion of care. The ambiguity of the term *cura* (care) illuminates the importance of being with someone (*Mit-sein*). On the one hand, *cura* means worries, troubles, and anxieties. On the other hand, it is a way of providing for the welfare of another: being a care-full, attentive, and conscientious companion through life in all its manifestations. And I mean *all*. This is the essence of ministry.

BB: The sense of ministry you speak of seems to go far beyond poetry and literature. What of the other arts? What role have they played in your development?

AW: Certainly music has been an important part of my personal and intellectual journey, particularly classical music. Recently, I have been listening again to Leif Ove Andsnes playing Grieg. Listening to music helps one to understand that education is self-education, and as such, a life-long process. Without the intimate familiarity with the Norwegian soul as formed by language, culture, landscape, and climate, one cannot understand that Grieg's music is a journey and not merely a technique to be mastered. Today, I look back with gratitude to my ongoing journey through the most famous concert halls, the crash courses on classical music at BBC Proms, the World's Greatest Classical Music Festival, which I was lucky to attend for a number of years. I studied in a College for English near the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Usually on my way to the College I would stop at the National Gallery for an hour or so. And after school I would go with my tutor or friends for a pint of beer before heading for an evening concert. Never before had I enjoyed that much spontaneity in the artistic life. It was common to see people coming to concerts straight from their offices with their briefcases and in business attire. This was so different from my continental experience, with its formality in approaching the temple of art.

And then there is dance, both classical and modern. I felt like I was living always in-between: discussing the upcoming performance at lunch with dancers, seeing it in the evening, and talking it through again over a late night dinner. Dance provides a powerful insight into human life. It is not as much about the execution of movement, even though, especially in classical ballet, movement is mastered to perfection, but it is far more about the meaning of life. It is not about creating the illusion of being detached from life and floating in the air, but about, being deeply rooted in everything that is truly a human experience while floating. Here I think with deep sentiments and gratitude particularly of my years in Munich, when my life was orchestrated by the rhythm of prayer, study, ballet, and opera—and love, which gives meaning to everything, without surrendering to the slogan *Love unites, doctrine divides*. There is no real need to separate thinking and living life to the fullest.

BB: The way you describe this, it seems almost decadent, a passive consumer of art. Yet you are almost fanatical about fitness and activity. How do these go together for you?

AW: It was only later that I discovered the relationship between art and sport. Out of necessity to strengthen my back muscles sprang passion for sport. Sport became a true inspiration in my life. At first, I couldn't imagine myself overcoming my disgust with physical education at school, the appalling smell of sweat, and overcrowded locker rooms. But there you are. My sport activities range from tennis in Boston and San Francisco, to skiing in the Alps (Davos and Malbun are still my favorites), to

water skiing in St. Lucia, and the countless hours of aerobics, cycling, yoga, and power training in the sport studios around the world. Without exaggeration, I can say that my personal geography of the world is marked by churches, gyms, and the few other places where music, dance, and life happen. It fascinates me to think that γεωγραφία is truly a very personal way of our writing about the earth, an intimate witness to our love of the world. This witness is born voluntarily and happily, for what we quite desperately want, is to let it appear through us in full splendor.

The experience in the concert halls, ballets, operas, theaters, and sport studios contributes as much to the maturing of a human being as the solitary time at desks, in libraries, in the company of books and wines.

BB: This kind of intensity surely takes its toll on your energy levels. Do you see yourself continuing this way?

AW: We do not know what future holds for us, and we will never know it. This is precisely what makes life worth living. Every day requires from us to render judgment in the integrity of the heart. Life is not about sticking to any formal arrangement, but about discovering and living life with passion. Human life is an existence between vulnerability and suffering. In German, there is a great tension between *Verwundbarkeit* (vulnerability) and *Verwundung* (injury). This tension expresses something essential about the emotional dimension of human life. Relational perceptiveness calls for personal presence and we know it with the integrity of our heart long before we can reflectively and cognitively realize it. Both *Verwundbarkeit* and *Verwundung* relate to *Wunde* (wound). In one of my earlier books, I wrote that to love means to risk (*wagen*) and remain vulnerable (*verletzbar*). This is quite contrary to what clinical psychologists and masters of relationships currently advise us to do.

BB: I've learned over the years that this vocabulary generally leads to an extensive discussion of Heidegger.

AW: How can we avoid it? Heidegger makes us aware of the vulnerability of language. What is philosophically fascinating is the discovery we make in our soul's conversation with itself (*soliloquium*), a conversation we constantly carry on with ourselves. In fact, before we can even turn toward the other and address the other, we are already, consciously or not, in a conversation with ourselves, dealing existentially with the primordial task to understand that *quaestio mihi factus sum*, the question we are to ourselves. We learn from Heidegger via Augustine to appreciate our factic life and try to deal with it phenomenologically by describing it as it shows itself and calls to be understood. This requires a creative way of dealing with all possible contradictions, which cannot be mastered and artificially pushed into an acceptable solution. Rather, hermeneutics calls for leaving the contradictions as they manifest themselves, so that they can bear witness to reality, a kind of sign post (*Wegweiser*) to hidden phenomena, which are behind the apparent contradictions.

Already in his early Marburg lectures, Heidegger was convinced—and here it is obvious he has been highly influenced by Augustine—that a human being is not only Dasein, but also *Wegsein*. The human being has a powerful inclination (*clinare*—to lean toward) to escape oneself. This tendency is something primordial; it encompasses the tension between the original fidelity to oneself and one’s being in the world and the equally original infidelity to oneself and the world. What we are called for is the radicality of personal responsibility, which means that we have to give a radical answer to the call to live our life, and nobody can do it for us (*stellvertretend*).

BB: Let us return to your formal intellectual development. You earned your doctorate in philosophy from Lublin. What did you do academically after that?

AW: After my doctorate in philosophy I realized that my intellectual journey had just begun. In my further studies I wanted to consult literature to better understand myself following what Augustine so succinctly expressed in his *Confessions: Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*—“Higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self.” At Harvard, I met Prof. Stanisław Barańczak. Together we read mystical poetry and navigated between his office at Harvard and my place at Boston’s Copley Plaza. At Harvard, I also met Prof. Czesław Miłosz, who invited me to come out to Berkeley. The following academic year I spent at the University of California at Berkeley. It was Miłosz who, himself fascinated by the speculative power of theology, persuaded me to continue with my doctorate in theology. Our long conversations throughout the whole year over Vodka in his living room overlooking San Francisco Bay essentially contributed not only to my book on what it means to be a poet, but convinced me that there is no single way and single discipline that can “tell it all.” I knew then that hermeneutics would be my way of life.

BB: So you went on to do another doctorate, this time in theology, but also it seems in poetry. How did that work?

AW: Prof. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the supervisor of my theological doctoral dissertation at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, now Bishop of Regensburg, made me aware of anthropology as a hermeneutics of theology. The insight into the human person cannot be separated from the reciprocal effects of God’s self-manifestation and the personal response proffered by human beings. Between the human and the divine, between philosophy and theology, between different modes of discourse, I have discovered the disturbing exigency of questions that need to be addressed, thus initiating my individual journey in search of my own personal and intellectual identity. Here I speak of the disturbing exigency in the sense of being called to radical attentiveness. *Turbare* means in Latin to throw into dis-order, con-fusion. One of the important aspects of intellectual life is to carefully address the confusion of voices we experience in our own life while searching for our

personal identity, including the voices and horizons which we do not necessarily welcome at first. Understanding always happens in the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) and reminds us that the act of interpretation does not so much unlock the meaning we are trying to un-cover but establishes a dialectic tension with different horizons far beyond deceitful and misplaced reconciliatory action so powerfully preached from the democratic pulpits and lecterns.

BB: You seem to remember this time in Munich very fondly. What made it such a positive experience for you?

AW: I have been extremely lucky to meet people in my life who were passionately searching for meaning in life. My first experience with Munich was in 1985. One day after preaching about the manifold meaning of life on a hot August Sunday in an idyllic St Georg Church in Bogenhausen in Munich—just on the outskirts of the English Garden, which in the summer months becomes a paradise for an attentive eye—I received a long handwritten letter in Italian as a commentary to my sermon. At that time my accent in German was very much influenced by my Italian and my blond hair fitted perfectly into a cliché of a Northern Italian patiently improving his German in the capital of beer and *foehn*, an alpine wind that brings sickness and depression, but also perfect visibility of the Alps. This was the beginning of one of my most meaningful friendships. Ella and Peter Dunkley assisted me throughout the following years with practical and academic arrangements, providing not only the necessary but supporting me with all I needed to unreservedly dedicate myself to living my life. Everything which is meaningful in life costs time, patience, and love. There is no need to rush. Perseverance, ὑπομονή, reminds us of the permanence necessary to understand ourselves in the human horizon of mutability. Just as it is important to be faithful and progressive in being rooted (μένω), energetic resistance and endurance (also in the sense of perseverance under suffering) in the face of trials are necessary to discover true meaning in life. I truly deem myself fortunate to live a life of a *Privatgelehrte*, a private scholar affiliated with the most prestigious universities and centers of learning without having to be overly concerned with the practicalities and technicalities of life.

I feel very much like a *Privatgelehrte* from the Nineteenth Century. Being a scholar is a vocation, which totally annihilates and entirely transforms one's former life. Vocation comes from Latin *vocatio*, a calling, summoning to a particular duty, from the verb *vocare*, to call, summon, which comes in turn from *vox*, voice. It is a particular sensibility to listening, to a calling to a specific form of life. The *will* and the *necessity* to follow a call emphasize the responsive (dialogical) character of the call (responsibility—*re-spondeo*). There is a beautiful passage in Fichte, where he speaks of a true scholar (*wahrhafter Gelehrte*). For Fichte, "In the True Scholar the Idea has acquired a personal existence which has entirely superseded his own, and absorbed it in itself. He loves the Idea, not before all else, for he loves nothing else beside it,—he loves it alone;—it alone is the source of all his joys, of all his pleasures; it alone is the spring of all his thoughts, efforts, and deeds; for it alone

does he live, and without it life would be to him tasteless and odious.” Intellectual life is very much about abandoning our security and risking true thinking by letting ourselves be powerfully imbued with a variety of gifts. Unfortunately, far too often academic life is reduced to skillful management of information transfer. Being a true scholar brings inspiration, personal growth, love, and happiness to our everyday life.

BB: This philosophy of life seems to spring partly from your specialty in Gustav Siewerth, a thinker whom Hans Urs von Balthasar called the greatest philosopher of the Twentieth Century.

AW: Von Balthasar once called Siewerth “a man with the heart of a child and the mind of a lion.” In his eulogy for Siewerth, Balthasar not only gave a personal testimony to his friend, “the giant among the philosophers,” but demonstrated how philosophy shaped Siewerth’s life and how his life shaped philosophy to which he was unreservedly dedicated. Balthasar spoke of the brilliance of the star, who was not understood by his contemporaries. Siewerth’s interpretation of the fate of metaphysics concentrates on the quest for a “divine God,” which would present an alternative to Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology. Siewerth bridges Heidegger and Aquinas by appropriating Hegelian dialectics. The forgetting of the complexity within the constitution of Being led to the forgetting of the original oneness of God and creature, the affirmation of which is the essence of Christianity. Balthasar discovered in Siewerth a fellow thinker, who not only understood the phenomenon of the forgetfulness of Being, but a philosopher, sensitive to the fact that the fate of metaphysics can only be seriously challenged through the Christian way of thinking as a Christian event (*Ereignis*).

BB: As concisely as possible, can you say what it is you find most significant in Siewerth’s philosophy?

AW: Siewerth was immersed in the Western philosophical tradition. Without taking an antiquarian approach to the history of philosophy, he looked at the development of philosophical ideas that are of relevance to the contemporary thinker. He was existentially interested in philosophy; not only as an academic curiosity, but as a way of disclosing truth. In his teaching and writing, he was convinced that great philosophy is the thinking of God. Siewerth was a Renaissance thinker: A philosopher well read in the classics, a lover of poetry and music, an art connoisseur, and a man of deep personal religious conviction. He was denounced as a catholic philosopher by Heidegger and barred from an academic post by the Nazis until 1945. After the war he could only secure a position in education, yet he remained a creative and original thinker. All of that makes him an attractive figure to me. Siewerth was someone who knew about suffering without falling into self-destructive pity and resentment. We witness a similar attitude in von Balthasar. Being “perhaps the most cultured man of our time,” as Henri de Lubac called him, Balthasar never became an academic theologian, however, he is considered one of the most important and

prolific theologians of the Twentieth Century. Time will show how influential his rather traditionalistic theology will be, even if it only will inspire thinkers to infuse much needed new visions. But Balthasar proves that great thinking does not need to have a traditional path to develop and mature. Thinking is not a nine-to-five job; we need time and solitude to think through the matter to be thought. Thinking cannot be reserved for people holding degrees and keeping office hours. And unfortunately, for many people titles and distinctions are still just a compensation for their personal shortcomings. When you see a prima ballerina in a swim suit walking on the beach you might not know her, but you unmistakably recognize that there is something captivating about the composition of her body and the execution of the movement. How often a conversation outside an academic office discloses something captivating about the mind of the interlocutors?

BB: You say Siewerth bridges Heidegger and Aquinas. What is his interpretation of Aquinas?

AW: For Siewerth, Aquinas is the greatest philosopher because he philosophizes in the light of theology (*sacra doctrina*). The examples from the New Testament show that God calls creation to himself by the Incarnation of the Word of God. This does not belong to the order of nature but to the order of the inner life of God in the mystery of the Trinity. God, who loves his Son, also loves his creation and acts through the Word of God. Yet such an explanation is one of the *descendens* type, i.e., in the light of Revelation, and not one of the *ascendens* type, i.e., starting from the ground, as is usual in philosophy.

In response to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, Siewerth's metaphysics exonerates Aquinas of the forgetfulness of Being by explicating the uniqueness of his thinking of Being. According to Siewerth, Aquinas was the first thinker ever to embrace Being in its complexity and unity. Siewerth's late work *The Fate of Metaphysics* elaborates his original version of Heidegger's notion of the forgetfulness of Being by implementing the Christian idea of original sin. Siewerth's hermeneutics of the philosophical tradition is rooted in Aquinas's understanding of philosophy, which is not the study of what others have thought, but thinking the truth. Siewerth's original interpretation of Aquinas is not a historical reconstruction of Thomas, but a hermeneutic retrieval that is *Sache*-oriented. The matter itself is in the center of the philosopher's attention: Aquinas's understanding is reinterpreted in the light of the hermeneutic concept of a historical distance. In Aquinas, Siewerth finds the basis for the theological empowerment of the thinking of Being. Only in the light of Revelation was it possible for Aquinas to philosophically disclose the Being of a being (*das Sein des Seienden*). *Thomas a creatore* means for Siewerth that Aquinas is relevant for contemporary thinking and needs to be put in direct dialogue with leading philosophers.

BB: Do you agree that von Balthasar implements Siewerth's theory of cognition, which is highly influenced by Aquinas?

AW: Siewerth stresses that for Aquinas the first and most universal effect emerging from God is Being itself. Siewerth's theory of knowledge is a reflection on the mystery of Being. He describes Being in its primordial tension, disclosing and concealing itself in actual beings. He defends Thomas as a philosopher who, like Heidegger, thinks within Being. It is his special concern to support the Thomistic theory of knowledge, which is, as he understands it, always already metaphysics. Being itself is the reason for the possibility of any knowledge of a being. The Being of a being (*das Sein des Seienden*) can only be grasped in a being (*das Seiende*). Like Aquinas, Siewerth is of the opinion that we do not perceive Being (*das Sein*) directly, but only through the mediation of a being (*das Seiende*). *Ens* is what we perceive; *esse* is that by which we perceive. In Siewerth's view, the question of the possibility of knowing God is inextricably connected with this model of thinking-within-Being. Revelation opens up the possibility of a philosophical knowledge of God, which can only be regarded as *praeambula fidei*. Von Balthasar implements to a large extent Siewerth's theory of cognition. In their correspondence we can see clearly how important Siewerth's interpretation of Aquinas was for von Balthasar.

BB: Heidegger was never quite convinced that Siewerth was a philosopher rather than a theologian. Would you agree with calling Siewerth more a theologian of nature than a philosopher of nature in the spirit of Augustine or Bonaventure, in which each thing is a reflection of the Trinity?

AW: I'm not sure that this is such a useful distinction in this case. The concept of the Trinity is essential to Siewerth, not only as a practicing Catholic, but as a philosopher. He speculatively elaborates the difference within Being, the difference between act and subsistence. This is the primordial difference, the essence of all differences, and the reason for the differentiation within Being itself. The difference between act and subsistence grounds the differentiation of each being within Being itself. In the true relationship between Being and a being, the different comes nearer to its ground. By means of this difference, Being emerges out of its depth and passes into subsistence. This difference also exists in God; it makes the self-communication of God possible, firstly within the Trinity, then also through the Being of a being. For Siewerth, the divine being combines simple unity with diversity. The divine person is subsisting, and as such a being-for-itself. The Trinitarian difference is possible when the otherness of God is understood as the emergence of a difference determined by Being. In his triple and inter-penetrating subsistence, God is a simple Being in itself. His otherness can only be thought as non-Being and non-unity. The self-knowledge of God makes it possible to see through the difference in God. In his unity and difference, God confronts absolute otherness and nullity. This otherness cannot be limited, either positively or negatively. The absolute difference in God can only be thought as an expression of the absolute freedom of God, who allows this possible abyss as his particular *ars divina*, which does not only refer to the projects of divine thinking and willing, but also to the fundamental original nullity, in so far as it is

contrasted with God. The difference within the Trinity can be understood as the product of the divine spirit itself. This difference permits the cognizing and loving divine spirit to have an inter-penetrating self, which leads to a begetting and loving life. This unity in diversity is the ground of the divine self-recognition. The divine Being is essentially unity and diversity.

The notion of Trinity is also fundamental to Siewerth's concept of exemplary identity (*exemplarische Identität*). God cognizes and expresses himself in the divine Word. By cognizing himself, God is cognized. God cognizes himself and loves himself thereby. He is the origin of cognition and has always been the same cognized being. God's decision to redeem his creation and the world and to call them into his Trinitarian inner life is pure grace, not a deed necessitated by the nature of the divinity. By Revelation, God shows to the world his will to redeem it. God is, in relation to the creature, its causal principle, i.e., he shares existence with his creature, but he is also, at the same time, the final reason for the intelligibility and rationality of creation. He communicates his plan for creation in the *Verbum*, which in turn communicates itself through Revelation. God is the fountain of all Being and, as such, *participabilis ad extra*. He is all-present in the world. All movement and action of the human being are directed toward God, i.e., he is the origin of, and aim of, all beings. As primal image and as purpose, God is immanent in the world; as material cause he remains transcendent with regard to the world.

BB: You speak of Being and Revelation, but you have written a great deal about kenosis, and its role in expressing the Trinitarian world view. How does this fit in with the other concepts?

AW: The deepest connection between Siewerth's ontology and von Balthasar's theology is the interpretation of Being as *kenosis*. As the Father empties himself into the Son, and the Son empties himself into the fallen world, so Being empties itself into beings. Von Balthasar's Theology of Holy Saturday highlights the immense distance bridged by the Father's love. The Son not only descends into Hell, he becomes identified with the damned. Thus, there is no longer any place where God is not. For Siewerth, this kenotic structure is reflected in creation. Being is itself kenotic. Hence, it is only in the light of Revelation that the truth about creation is revealed.

Siewerth believes in the kenotic nature of reality that every creature gratuitously pours itself out or constitutes a self-emptying in itself, reflecting God's Trinitarian nature. Siewerth's philosophy is a theologically empowered thinking of Being (*theologisch ermächtigtetes Seinsdenken*). The dynamics of nature reflects the essence of the Trinity. Being cannot be separated from things, without losing the fullness of its existence; beings separated from their actualizing ground would fade into nothingness. Being as the actualizing ground of beings pours itself out. It is a transcendental ground, which enables the emergence of all reality. This Being needs to be thought in its most primordial empowerment by reality itself and in its likeness to God. In that context, Siewerth calls God "the sea of Being, the pure act, the

unadulterated reality.” In its undifferentiation and undividedness God contains all disclosed differences. This grounding ground includes in itself the fullness of Being and beings, and, as such, is not only the cause, but also the ground of the possibility of the emergence of all things into existence. Being in its likeness to God is the mediating element in the constitution of Being. Referring to Aquinas, Siewerth stresses that the *Verbum* is the mediating element which makes possible the exposition of the difference between *ipsum esse* and *actus essendi*, and between *actus essendi* and *actus essentiae*. The Trinitarian identity of identity and non-identity reveals to Siewerth the meaning of Being. Exemplary identity is a manifestation of the identity and non-identity of created Being and its uncreated archetype. Exemplary identity takes the place of Hegelian dialectical identity. For Hegel, dialectical identity implied an identification of finite and infinite Being. For Aquinas, the eternal Word of God—*Verbum Dei*—is the archetype of creation, identical with creation in so far as both *Verbum Dei* and creation, while remaining distinct from each other, are likeness of God. Siewerth’s notion of the identity of Being and non-Being as ideality is rooted in this. The *actus essendi* connects everything with God. All that is created is different from God, but the likeness of God expresses the original oneness of God and creation. Ideality as the identity of Being and non-Being signifies that non-Being is already included in the act of Being as a result of God’s self-knowledge. Yet for Siewerth, non-Being is not a fundamental ontological principle, as it is for Hegel. While postulated by reason, it is not a constitutive element of Being. It is, however, necessary for the comprehension of Being.

BB: So reflection on the Trinity is for you part of philosophy as well as theology. There are many—not just philosophers, but also theologians—who would object to the Trinity as a universal experience appropriate for philosophical reflection.

AW: But *it* is universal! The evolution of the archetype in the history of religious experience is an important recurring subject in the debate through the centuries on Trinity. C.G. Jung points out that the triad arrangements as an archetype in the history of religion essentially influenced the Christian understanding of Trinity. What fascinates me is the manner in which Jung often tackled complex and difficult subjects. What we today know as his “Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity” sprang from a momentous meeting with Andreas Speiser from Basel during the Second World War in 1940. After his lecture on “The Platonic Doctrine of the Unknown God and the Christian Trinity,” Jung disappeared in the afternoon with a copy of the Bible. Next day he presented a lecture, which according to those present was breathtaking. He spoke slowly, paying extreme attention to every word uttered. It was not a simple repetition of what he already knew, but an intense meditation on the centrality of the Trinity to the psyche. For Jung, the Christian notion of the Trinity represents a symbol of the collective psyche. God the Father symbolizes a primitive phase, the Son an intermediate and reflective phase. In the Holy Spirit everything returns to the origin, deepened and enriched through the intermediate reflections.

This spontaneous talk still remains an important source of inspiration for us, extremely thought-provoking, and calling for a critical debate (*Auseinander-setzung*).

BB: Back when we were working on the translation for *Inspired Metaphysics*, one of your concerns was that Siewerth be read not only in German, but also known internationally. Whenever we were discussing Siewerth, there was literally nothing to refer to in English.

AW: I published the first English introduction to Siewerth's metaphysics, *Inspired Metaphysics? Gustav Siewerth's Reading on the Onto-Theological Tradition* in 2003 (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press). Siewerth's *opusculum*, *Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes*, *Being as Likeness of God*, which I compare to Aquinas's *De ente et essentia* has been translated by myself and has appeared in a bilingual German-English edition with my commentary as *Philosophizing with Gustav Siewerth: A New German Edition with Facing Translation of "Das Sein als Gleichnis Gottes"/"Being as Likeness of God," And A Study, "From Metaphor and Indication to Icon: The Centrality of the Notion of Verbum in Hans-Georg Gadamer, Bernard Lonergan, and Gustav Siewerth"* (Konstanz: Verlag Gustav Siewerth Gesellschaft, 2005). After I translated the treatise based on Siewerth's *Collected Works*, I discovered Siewerth's original manuscript that is somewhat different from the published version. The present English translation is based on Siewerth's handwriting, which has also been published in German for the first time. For the centenary of von Balthasar's birth, I prepared a bilingual, German-English edition of the Siewerth-Balthasar correspondence, which has been published for the first time from the original manuscripts as *Between Friends: The Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gustav Siewerth Correspondence (1954-1963): A Bilingual Edition*. Ed. and trans. Andrzej Wiercinski (Konstanz: Verlag Gustav Siewerth Gesellschaft, 2005). I wanted to bring out the textual evidence for the philosophical influence Siewerth exercised on von Balthasar.

BB: What influence is this? Are you referring to the need to return to metaphysics?

AW: Yes. Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger's programmatic and progressive deconstruction of metaphysics inspired and necessitated a philosophical, epistemological, deconstructive, and political critique of metaphysics, which, in turn, proved the indispensability of metaphysics for philosophy. In recent philosophical literature, we notice again a return to metaphysics with fresh vigor.

My own contribution to the return of metaphysics starts with the evaluation of Heidegger's *Verabschiedung der Metaphysik*. With reference to the return to metaphysics through neoscholastic philosophy, and particularly in discussion with Siewerth, I offer a contemporary reassessment of medieval philosophy that demonstrates its prevailing value and relevance. My discussion with the onto-theological tradition serves as an example of how we can still critically engage the medieval tradition without reducing ourselves to offering a pure historical

reconstruction of the past. The hermeneutic retrieval of the Middle Ages aims at a genuine rendition of the medieval tradition in order to be able to carry forward and thereby transform the philosophical ideas in their own *Wirkungsgeschichte*. A hermeneutic retrieval opens up new creative possibilities of understanding the tradition. It can happen only by an attempt to reproduce, to render (*wiedergeben*) and to reiterate (*wiederholen*) the ideas of medieval philosophy as a constitutive part of the living history of metaphysics. As opposed to the historical-critical reading of the sources, I engage the philosophical texts of the Middle Ages in a contemporary horizon. The text is lifted from its original context and thrust into an alien context in the act of reading. There is no possible return to the “original” meaning. The reflection on medieval philosophy and its *Wirkungsgeschichte* offers a creative orientation to post-modern thinking exposed to the increasingly abstract rationalization and separation of all areas of Dasein. The metaphysical texts are themselves determined by their inter-textual relations, by their variable readings, and by dialogues among their readers. As such, they always remain incomplete; always open to new understanding by future readers.

My hermeneutic re-reading of metaphysical tradition thus goes against the idea of the post-philosophical era, that a once meaningful tradition has now finally been put to rest. I clearly demonstrate the relevance of the past to our own thinking and show that, by engaging ourselves with a positive critique of various metaphysical revivals, we can renew speculative philosophy.

The Heideggerian account of our ontological situation maintains that we, as understanding beings, are continually projecting our own prejudices onto the world and must continually revise them. We acquire these prejudices at an individual level in learning our language together with a set of concepts, while adopting a hidden *tradition* concerning that set of concepts. These prejudices are not something independent of language, or perhaps even less, supervenient to language; they are embedded in the very meanings of the concepts we use. The possession of a language is not only a necessary condition for our being able to experience the world as world, but the particular language that we adopt at any time will affect the way in which we experience the world. Our perception of the world in which we live takes shape by exploring the evolution of the language through which we gain insight into how we presently view our world. Historical investigations make us conscious of the contingencies and limitations of our present perspective. Entrusted with this insight, we become what Gadamer calls a *historically effected consciousness (wirkungs-geschichtliches Bewußtsein)*.

BB: Along with your work on metaphysics and the history of philosophy, you have always been passionate about hermeneutics. In 2001, while living in Toronto, you founded the International Institute for Hermeneutics.

AW: The IHH is an autonomous, international, and interdisciplinary research institute, with connections to many universities around the world through an international advisory board and a network of associates. The International Advisory Board is a

group of distinguished scholars in fields related to hermeneutics appointed by the President with whom the President keeps in regular contact and consults on matters of governance, policy, and research, as deemed necessary. The International Network of Associates is group of scholars invited by the President to participate on a regular basis in the activities of the Institute. The Associates are invited to submit research papers and monographs, assist the President in executing academic and research programs at the Institute, and participate in the activities of the Institute.

We have a particular concentration in philosophy, religious studies, and comparative literature. However, the field of hermeneutics embraces all of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. As Gianni Vattimo puts it, this is the “age of interpretation.” The IHH was founded to foster and articulate a general hermeneutics, a task demanding an intensive interdisciplinary collaboration on a level that does not yet exist in the contemporary university. We concentrate on the concrete activity of interpreting texts, facilitating research in hermeneutics, and assisting universities and educational institutions in including hermeneutic issues in their pedagogy. Although English is our primary language, the IHH is a house of language. As such, we intentionally operate in several languages. Our goal is to overcome the divisions that have encumbered the academic conversation; divisions between faculties, disciplines, cultures, and religious traditions. Hermeneutics is the place where all meet on equal ground.

BB: I remember so many discussions we had at your apartment in Toronto, and trying to figure out how to foster more of these seemingly informal but highly productive conversations. This led to the first formulations of the eventual mission of the IHH.

AW: The IHH promotes understanding between the humanities and the natural sciences by elaborating the interpretive nature of all knowledge. It fosters collaboration within the human and social sciences by clarifying the methodologies common to “text-based” disciplines. The Institute also advances awareness in the public sector of the nature of research in the human and social sciences, and its relation to research in the natural sciences.

Fundamental to hermeneutics is the thesis that understanding any kind of information, textual or empirical, engages basic patterns of thinking, which are essentially interpretive; *that is, understanding operates through presuppositions*. Opposed to this is the assumption that true knowledge reflects objects in themselves, without reference to historical contexts of meaning. On this assumption, disciplines bound to historically conditioned texts have been disparaged as unscientific. Our members, coming from different areas of specialization, are united in the conviction that hermeneutics is the concept broad enough to embrace the variety of meaning in the human, social, and natural sciences. Hermeneutics presupposes the unity of human understanding, which makes researchers of different disciplines members of a single community of inquirers, a community of learning.

BB: Let's discuss the operation of the IIIH. As you organized the first conference and volume in 2002, so much of our work together was done electronically, since I was in Boston while you were in Toronto. This new ability to communicate electronically has certainly played a key role in the development of the Institute's identity.

AW: The IIIH is an innovative new form of academic collaboration, even postmodern, if the term is understood in the positive sense as the recognition of a legitimate diversity of modes of human thinking. The mandate of the IIIH includes organizing the international congresses, conferences, and academic sessions on hermeneutics, publishing monographs on hermeneutics, sponsoring lectures, seminars, and workshops on general and applied hermeneutics, and launching an international annual, *Analecta Hermeneutica* <http://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta>. *Analecta Hermeneutica* is the annual refereed journal of the Institute. It provides an intellectual forum for interdisciplinary, inter-religious, and inter-national hermeneutic research. The journal publishes research in the form of articles, reviews, and other scholarly contributions in all hermeneutically related fields, with a particular focus on philosophy, theology, and comparative literature, and occasional re-prints and translations of seminal articles from the hermeneutic tradition. We invite scholars from various linguistic communities to contribute innovative and critical ideas to the hermeneutic conversation. Although the primary language of *Analecta Hermeneutica* is English, articles in German, French, Italian, and Spanish are welcome.

Initially, we published through our own publishing house, *The Hermeneutic Press*. Recently we have launched a new series *International Studies in Hermeneutics and Phenomenology* at LIT Verlag in Germany, <http://www.lit-verlag.de/reihe/ishp>. We invite original international studies in phenomenology and hermeneutics to the series.

Communication technology is at the heart of the IIIH's methodology, enabling the collaboration we have achieved so far. We turn the IIIH into a virtual *piazza globale*, where scholars from all cultural, linguistic, professional, and religious backgrounds converse freely with each other on the subjects that make us all scholars.

BB: I remember the first volumes of the Institute very well; they concentrated on the "Between." Is that still a concentration? Do you plan to extend it to other "betweens"?

AW: This will always be a concentration, and one natural extension is to inter-religious dialogue. Hermeneutics has had immense impulses from theology through the work of Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Bernard Lonergan, Protestant theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth, and Jewish theologians Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. In different ways, they have shown us that the philosophical and historical traditions of the world are intimately interwoven with the practice of human religion.

Understanding traditional texts is not possible without religious contextualization, a context that can be engaged independent of any particular religious commitment. While hermeneutics recognizes the unique disclosure of religious meaning in the horizon of a particular faith, hermeneutics is equally interested in the disclosure of meaning of a religious text in the horizon of un-belief. In the hermeneutic universe, no voice can be excluded from the conversation on the grounds that their view is “biased” by a faith commitment or a lack thereof. As Gadamer has shown, our “pre-judgments” do not impede understanding; on the contrary they make it possible. Yet a forum for inter-theological discussion (not simply a department for the study of religion as a phenomenon of human culture, which often excludes the theological voice) is difficult to find in today’s academic topography.

The other extensions are political and cultural, between nations and cultures. The world of business has already recognized that the economy is global; the world of academia has been slower to recognize the global unification of research on an unprecedented scale made possible by modern communication. A university can no longer remain content within its national setting, and not only in context of recruiting international students as a source of much needed income. It must become a center where the nations meet to discuss issues crucial to the whole human community. We can only understand the other by entering into his or her horizon of thinking, and we can only enter into the horizon of the other by first recognizing that it is *other* than our horizon; we cannot assume an immediate understanding of it, but must *interpret*. Understanding happens by the way of interpretation.

The International Institute for Hermeneutics orchestrates an international collaboration among colleagues and advanced students. By being led into a conversation, to use Gadamer’s terms, we are reminded that everything that is thought is always thought by a concrete human being, thus I understand my role as a facilitator of academic exchange. My attentiveness to all practical needs of the conversational partners makes certain the conversations have the best chance to be productive and fruitful.

The intense international collaboration leads inevitably to potential conflicts in terms of the conflict of interests. My hermeneutic understanding of the conflict of interpretations offers profound help in solving conflict situations by inquiring into the nature of the conflict and assisting the involved parties in understanding their often incompatible perspectives. The idea of hermeneutic hospitality is key here: the call to an unconditional welcoming of the strange and unexpected (*hospitium*).

BB: The IHH stresses the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, as shown in the first volume; a collaboration between theologians and philosophers.

AW: It might be better to speak of the second volume on Paul Ricoeur, which brought together not only philosophers and theologians, but legal and literary scholars. Hermeneutics cannot happen without a level of inter-disciplinary collaboration that, for the most part, does not yet exist on university campuses. The theologian needs the philosopher as much as the philosopher needs the theologian,

both need the literary critic, the historian needs the sociologist and vice versa, the political theorist needs the economist, the natural scientist needs the cultural theorist, etc. Hermeneutics is a resolute break with the specialization that has left so many disciplines isolated from each other, an effort to redress the fragmentation of the sciences, without infringing upon the unique area of inquiry that determines any individual science as such. Therefore, the inter-disciplinary collaboration is not about gathering experts from different disciplines to be in charge of the individual aspect pertaining to their specialization, but an invitation to think *together* from different perspectives about the same matter which needs to be understood.

BB: This level of international collaboration inevitably runs up against the problem of multiple languages.

AW: Anyone who has done work in translation knows that in some sense translation is impossible. What is said in a particular language is said in a distinct form of life and context of meaning. The only way to understand a text is to read it in its original language; the only way to read a language is to be familiar with the form of life that constitutes its horizon of meaning. Nonetheless, as Walter Benjamin puts it, we *must* translate. We must speak *to* each other. Translation is not a simple substitution of languages, but a hermeneutic exercise of interpreting how a meaning nexus can be transposed into a historical-linguistic horizon different from the one in which it first arose.

BB: Could you quickly summarize your understanding of hermeneutics?

AW: The historicity, temporality, and linguality of human understanding is the foundational insight of hermeneutics. Without collapsing critical thought into relativism, hermeneutics recognizes that understanding is always situated and determined by historical, linguistic, and cultural horizons of meaning. Problems and questions can only be genuinely understood through a grasp of the historical situation within which they first arose. Thus is hermeneutics the practice of historical retrieval and re-construction. Unlike the study of history, however, hermeneutics does not re-construct the past for its own sake, but always for the sake of understanding the particular way a problem or question can be engaged in *the present*. It is only by addressing the old questions within ever-new hermeneutic horizons that understanding breaks through the limitations of any particular cultural setting, to the matter which calls for thought. The notion of the hermeneutic circle formulates the relationship between whole and part operative in thinking. If the part can only be understood based on prior knowledge of the whole, and the whole is only known through a prior knowledge of its parts, how then can we understand either part or whole? The paradox shows the fallacy in the idea that we can think without presuppositions. Hermeneutics affirms the historical and cultural conditioning of all understanding. New ideas are always understood based on what we already understand. There can be no thinking without presuppositions, and all

presuppositions are nested in historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Thus to understand a particular body of knowledge we must make explicit its historical and methodological presuppositions.

Hermeneutics opposes the radical relativist notion that meaning cannot be trans-lingual. As the speculative grammarians of the Middle Ages recognized, the grammars of the world's languages are rooted in a depth grammar of human meaning. This depth grammar may not be codifiable; it is not a meta-language in which everything can be said. Rather, it is the single horizon of human understanding, which makes speakers of various languages members of a human community. On the other hand, hermeneutics opposes the rationalist tendency to downplay the uniqueness of languages. Hermeneutics is not satisfied with translating the language of the other; it wants to speak *with* the other *in* the language of the other. As such, hermeneutics is philosophy in the original sense of the word, the love (*philia*), the desire for wisdom (*sophia*), as comprehensive an understanding of human existence as is possible.

BB: I suppose it should be no surprise that this formulation sounds very Gadamerian. What was your relationship with Hans-Georg Gadamer?

AW: When I wrote my Master's Thesis on the ontology of language in Gadamer's hermeneutics at the age of 23, I did not even think of the possibility of confronting my understanding of Gadamer with the thinker himself. However, a few years later, Professor Balduin Schwarz, with whom I was engaged in an intense conversation, interrupted me at seeing a tall man approaching us. "Hans-Georg, may I introduce to you my friend Andre." Balduin Schwarz disappeared, leaving me with a chance to discover a truly passionate conversationalist with astonishing energy, incomparable patience, and natural sympathy for his interlocutors. His amazing ability of focusing on the conversation was grounded in his being a teacher who is always eager to learn something new without ever wanting to determine the way of his partner's thinking. I was happy to share with him a bottle of white wine. I was fortunate enough to meet with Gadamer frequently over the next few years until I left for Canada. Some years later Gadamer expressed his support for the International Institute for Hermeneutics, but unfortunately it was not granted to me to see him again. I am to this day very grateful that I had a chance to share some time with him.

There were also a few pragmatic reasons why I felt at home within his hermeneutic horizon. Gadamer was a night person, with a great passion for nightly debates over wine. When I came to Germany in 1986, I did not have to choose between attending the late classes of Nicolai Hartmann and jumping out of bed early the next morning to sit in Martin Heidegger's lectures, regularly beginning at seven o'clock in the morning. Passionate discussion late at night in the company of great thinkers and good wine is a great gift. At night we see differently. There is a deep sense of healing when the interlocutors turn toward one another. This is the beginning of hermeneutic friendship. The hermeneutic task is based on "the dialogue that we are" (*Das Gespräch das wir sind*). In this dialogue, in which meaning is

carried, lies our interpretation of the world in which we live. And regardless where I live at the moment, it is always easier to meet me late at night than in the morning hours.

BB: Beyond the personal, what is your appreciation of Gadamer's importance to hermeneutics?

AW: Gadamer's hermeneutic openness and humility are rooted in his conviction that to understand a person means to take seriously one's viewpoints and truth claims. One of the basic principles of a conversation which leads to reaching an agreement in understanding is willingness to learn from one's disagreements. By accepting the differences in the partners, a true conversation brings a transformation in understanding both of oneself and of the topic. Gadamer makes us aware that we will always understand differently if we understand at all. This is the very condition of our finitude.

Following Heidegger's claim that "the essence of art is poetry," Gadamer fully articulates the importance of poetry in the history of philosophy. The poetic word, insofar as it is poetic, stands in itself; and yet as word it invokes something beyond itself. The hermeneutic task of interpreting a poem is not about finding a way to express the poem's meaning, but rather, finding our way into the meaning of the poem's own words.

Undoubtedly, there are problems with interpreting some aspects of Gadamer's political life, especially with his taking advantage of the turmoil in German Academia during the Nazi and Soviet periods. Since no answer concerning his culpability can be definitive, the argument which speaks best for him is that his life was a hermeneutics in action, a display of unprecedented love of dialogue and search for truth in the closed circuits of historical life. For Gadamer, "Being that can be understood is language." Therefore, hermeneutics offers the possibility of a dialogue in which we can overcome our own limitations and the limitations of our initial position and move toward a richer understanding of ourselves and the world in which we exist.

BB: Of course, we cannot talk about Gadamer without discussing *Truth and Method*.

AW: Gadamer's *magnum opus* (which appeared when he was sixty years old, i.e., only five years prior to his retirement), is an exploration of the foundations of the humanities and social sciences as distinct forms of knowledge. He devoted his scholarly life to the exploration of human understanding and interpretation, and the ways in which humans interpret themselves and their activities. For him, our knowledge is grounded in tradition, in the languages we speak, and in great works of art. Coming to understanding is a process of dialogue with the past, with the necessary fusion of horizons between the world embodied in the work and the contemporary world, between the contemporary interpreter and the cultural tradition.

Gadamer's hermeneutic generosity was rooted in his natural openness to his interlocutor and his basic assumption that the opponent is most probably right.

According to Jürgen Habermas, Gadamer's critical development of Heidegger's notion of understanding (*Verstehen*), the self-interpretation and projective nature of Dasein, "urbanized the Heideggerian province." With his teacher's fidelity to the origin (*Ursprung*), he develops his own unique readings of Greek and Latin thinking, complimenting the Heideggerian emphasis on the past with sensitivity to the dialogic and social nature of understanding. Gadamer emphasizes that a dialogue between religions and cultures is humanity's last chance to preserve itself from the self-destructive forces unleashed by the technological age. As "we live always anew in a dialogue," hope becomes our *modus existendi*, our only way to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the other, and therefore, the only way to a civilization of tolerance and respect for alterity. The Gadamerian hermeneutic enterprise consequently extends to the profound transformation of the world. The call to interpret is ontological, ethical, and transcendental, for it points to our roots in other worlds, and demands a personal response, not only to be-there, but to be-grateful to Being.

BB: Another hermeneutic giant is Paul Ricoeur. What was your connection with him?

AW: To celebrate Ricoeur's 90th birthday, we published the volume *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003). It was not a formal *Festschrift*; our goal was to address the complexity of Ricoeur's philosophy in the multiplicity of voices that constitute the tradition that we are. Ricoeur had originally offered to respond to all contributions, but his deteriorating health did not allow him to individually address over 50 papers. Upon receiving the volume, Ricoeur stressed that the tension between suspicion and sympathy runs through all his work and resonates with another one which is equally dear to him, between critique and conviction. When we met in November 2003 at the International Symposium, *Herméutica y responsabilidad: Homenaje a Paul Ricoeur* in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, Ricoeur once again expressed his appreciation for the volume, calling it "a thorough and comprehensive companion to his work."

BB: What is your appreciation of the importance of the hermeneutics of Ricoeur?

AW: Paul Ricoeur is not only a great hermeneutician, but a philosopher, who unreservedly converses with theology, searching for his self-understanding through a better understanding of the texts of his faith. Being an agnostic "on the plane of philosophy," Ricoeur holds that there are some matters of thinking not accessible in a purely philosophical mode of discourse. In his own case, the mediation between religion and faith by way of atheism takes the form of a long detour and becomes in his journey through language a hermeneutics of incompleteness. Ricoeur's rhythm of

explanation and understanding does not only address the mediation between different modes of interpretation, but requires the mediation between different scientific fields and disciplines.

Gadamer and Ricoeur remind us that hermeneutics is a way of understanding our belonging to the world. As interpreting subjects we belong to the world we interpret. The hermeneutic circle is constitutive of our understanding and a remainder that presuppositionless interpretation is impossible for a historical being. Understanding is an event in which interpreter and text mutually determine each other. Understanding is both temporal and finite. The understanding of our presuppositions and prejudices becomes our hermeneutic task: Our existence is understood in the variety of conflicting interpretations. The evolution of the answers is contingent on the evolution of the questions. Ricoeur makes us aware of the fact that narrative is a figuration of the acting and suffering person; the ontological priority of life emphasizes the demand of the narrative to grasp the depth of life. The hermeneutic experience teaches us that our thinking horizon, while aiming at totality and unity, always remains fragmentary. We cannot transform this horizon into a possession, not because we are lacking hermeneutic tools, but because it is a human horizon, i.e., finite and temporal. Hermeneutics is not only about the conceptual clarity and argumentative rigor, but about an ever developing interpretation, open to the challenges of the fast pace world we live in; an interpretation which puts everything in question but offers a deep transformative insight to those willing to be challenged by it.

The Twentieth Century retrieval of Aristotle's elaboration of a contextual mode of knowing appropriate to decision making, *phronesis*, as distinct from the more certain modes of knowing practiced in the natural sciences, has played an enormous role in opening methodology to the *praxis* of historically situated reason. Ricoeur argues that "knowing-how" is as much knowledge as "knowing-that." The turn to the foundation of thinking in concrete ways of going about life and everydayness is recognition of the practical reason or applied understanding that parents, religious leaders, canon lawyers, policy makers, civil lawyers, and judges employ every day. In applying universal principles to singular situations, understanding descends from the theoretical into life. This descent is never an abdication of reason, but rather, an involvement in the uncertain, the provisional, and the contextual, in which reason shows itself to be at home. The question remains: How can we reconcile practical thinking with the universal knowledge sought by science? Is truth not always and everywhere true? The best witnesses to the *praxis* of historical thinking are the practitioners themselves.

BB: Just recently you have published *Hermeneutics between Philosophy and Theology: The Imperative to Think the Incommensurable* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010). Tell us a little about that work.

AW: I situate the contemporary debate on the relationship between philosophy and theology beyond Athens and Jerusalem. The original antonymy set up by Tertullian

collapses in the light of the undeniably theological lineage of modern Western philosophy. In response to this, I show that through the intellectual legacy of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, philosophy and theology are inextricably intertwined throughout the history of the West. To substantiate my claim I indicate that the major theologians of the Twentieth Century have borrowed heavily from philosophy: Bultmann, Barth, Rahner, and von Balthasar, in various ways owe a particular debt to the traditions of classical German philosophy. But philosophy has been no less infected by theological concerns and influences. Moderns including Kant and Hegel are hugely indebted to their theological heritage, while postmoderns such as Heidegger and Levinas also cannot be imagined without their theological questions. The need to address the possibility of natural theology, and the relationship between philosophy and theology, became a dominating concern not only of Christianity, but of Western philosophy as well.

BB: So Hermeneutics in once again the path of mediation, the between.

AW: Yes. Hermeneutics quietly pursues its path of mediation between the two islands of mutual misunderstanding, religion and the secular mainstream. Hermeneutics involves itself in the in-between of the troubled relationship, and is ever more conscious of the finitude and historicity of human understanding. The tension between theology and philosophy in the Western tradition is not simply a problem to be solved. It has, in fact, produced many positive results by stimulating philosophers and theologians to address hermeneutic questions.

A hermeneutic investigation of the contemporary relationship between philosophy and theology could draw on any number of texts. I examine the problematic insofar as it occasions or emerges from the writings of John Paul II, John Milbank, Karl Barth, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur. The vitality of these texts, shown both in their execution and in their critical reception, proves that the issue they explore is still very relevant.

On the recent horizon of the debate, we still see quite opposed views, from the total separation between theology and philosophy advocated by Radical Orthodoxy, to renewed calls to overcome the anachronistic division between them made by transcendental Thomism and liberal Protestantism. On the one hand, John Milbank commands theology to dismiss philosophy; on the other, *Fides et Ratio* describes an intimate bond between theological and philosophical wisdom.

BB: But you give Heidegger credit for giving rise to a rethinking of Christian theology.

AW: In my work I show that Heidegger's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence not only dismantled onto-theology but, in turn, gave rise to a rethinking of Christian theology which discovered that the logos of biblical theology is radically different from the logos of Greek philosophy and modern rationalism. Heidegger's effort to resurrect the early Christian animosity between genuine religiosity and

ontology was never completed. His work is riddled with Christian themes, overturned, re-configured, and disguised, to be sure, but undeniably Christian in origin. His proclamation of a post-theistic return to the sacred sounds empty and contrived in the light of recent scholarship. I'm convinced that many of us are still too involved with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to bend the knee before Heidegger's "Holy," while the rest enact a curious return to the situation in Athens as analyzed by Paul in Acts: We find ourselves with Heidegger, worshiping the Christian God under a pagan guise. Nevertheless, there is a truly valuable element in Heidegger's thought: His call for a much-needed return to an attitude of humility before the mystery whence all things come and toward which all things return.

BB: Heidegger, however, would never support anything other than a radical separation between philosophy and theology.

AW: Heidegger's emphasis on language marked the hermeneutic turn in philosophy: To think a concept, it is necessary to think the history of the concept, and the history of the concept is implicit in the language which expresses it. Thus there is no a-historical access to ideas; an idea is essentially a historical entity. Its historicity is a function of its being. Adopting the language of a negative or mystical theology, Heidegger questions the very possibility of a philosophical dialogue with medieval theology. However, the Gadamerian retrieval of *verbum interius*, a theological insight, renews the young Heidegger's project of a phenomenological and hermeneutic rehabilitation of medieval theology.

On hermeneutic grounds, I call for a rejection of Heidegger's efforts to entrench a radical separation of philosophy from theology. Such a separation is not sustainable. However insistent philosophy and theology have been about maintaining the boundary between them, cross-fertilization is a fact of history. Hermeneutics calls for a re-thinking, on multiple levels, of the problematic relationship between philosophy and theology.

BB: This obviously moves into my area, where Ricoeur is an important case of a philosopher who has an "apprentice theologian" that moves within him.

AW: The openness of the philosophy-theology question is perhaps most salient in the work of Paul Ricoeur. He is emphatically a philosopher and not a theologian, but he is equally emphatically a committed Protestant Christian. No hermeneutic engagement of his work can avoid the relevance of this tension, a tension made all the more productive by Ricoeur's refusal to resolve it in his work. But a thorough examination of his work, coupled with his own thoughts on his life and his faith, opens new possibilities for reconfiguring the relationship between philosophy and theology. Philosophy and theology are not simply static disciplines in need of logical connection, they are dynamic historical ways of thinking that are animated by the specific and very individual philosophers and theologians who practice them. The hermeneutic tools of retrieval, particularly narrative identity, are necessary to tell the

story of the relationship between philosophy and theology, with coherence found by way of a narrative logic rather than a formal one.

Philosophers who have been theologically influenced find their counterbalance in theologians grappling with the role of philosophy. Both Swiss theologian Karl Barth and British theologian John Milbank are of necessity very well versed in the philosophical trends of their time. Barth engages the heirs of Kant and Schleiermacher, while Milbank takes aim that postmodern French philosophy in particular. Both theologians are suspicious of the philosophical desire to colonize theology, and are concerned about theology's integrity.

BB: But if we are to avoid both radical separation and colonization, there must be some way to think the space between the two.

AW: The space opened up between philosophy and theology, a space created by the incommensurability of the two, is an invitation to hermeneutics. What happens in the no-man's land between them is, and can only be, hermeneutics. It is a hermeneutics between the courage to ask and the humility to listen. My investigation does not end up with the decision on the proper relation between philosophy and theology, but, rather, endeavors to show that the only way to negotiate the space between them is by doing hermeneutics. The incommensurability of philosophy and theology requires that hermeneutics flourish, that a multiplicity of interpretations develops in the space between, because they must. Philosophy and theology cannot eliminate the interpretative space which exists by virtue of the distance between them. Neither can forbid the other to interpret their relationship otherwise.

The "belonging-together" of philosophy and theology refers to the historical belonging-together of the Western philosophical and theological traditions. I show that throughout history, movements that were regarded as philosophically autonomous were, in fact, impregnated with theological ideas. On the theological side, what would Christianity be without Greek metaphysics? Something completely different, perhaps unimaginably different. Luther failed to retrieve early Christianity without metaphysics because, hermeneutically speaking, this is not an option. Hermeneutic philosophy must engage theology: The subject-matter of hermeneutics, *die Sache selbst*, is theological. Hermeneutics is not theology, but it must be open to theology if it is to be receptive to the voices that constitute the tradition that we are.

The ancient Jews firmly believed that "without a vision, the people perish." The history of human thinking, and particularly the accomplishment of the Christian tradition as the continuation of the Jewish heritage, can be seen as an attempt to develop a hermeneutics of the "between" of the human and divine, which would help to develop the proper *modus existendi* for Christians. The hermeneutics of the "between" of philosophy and theology aims at a richness of voices that will address the drama of human existence with the urgency it deserves.

In the hermeneutic age, philosophy has lost its pretension to speak from an absolute perspective (on the basis of pure reason, autonomy, ahistoricity, etc). Many of the arguments against incorporating theology into philosophy have been

based on the assumption that whereas philosophy, as “pure reason,” is free of cultural situatedness, theology is culturally conditioned, peculiar to an historical group. Now we see that Western philosophy is as much a cultural phenomenon as is Western theology; it is a kind of creed of critical reasoning, which derives from Socrates, is further refined during the Middle Ages, and springs forth fully-developed in the Enlightenment. That this creed aspires to autonomy does not change the fact that it emerges from a culturally—and theologically—conditioned situation. Indeed, philosophy in the West is as much a form of life as is theology. If philosophy and theology are both forms of life (as Wittgenstein said), then neither has, a priori, a privilege over the other; theology, of course, loses its privilege, but so does philosophy. On the other hand, we can speak of both a philosophical and a theological perspective on the relationship between philosophy and theology. Two forms of life speak to each other, but theology has something that philosophy does not, the authority of God (for faith), and philosophy has something that theology does not, skeptical freedom from authority. In our discourses, then, we need to clearly distinguish between the theological and philosophical perspectives, recognizing that the other view, whether theological or philosophical, is always possible. This gives theology and philosophy the freedom to develop in dialogical independence from one another, liberated from our idealization of a synthesis between them. Only in firmly grasping their differences can we preserve the ground for a conversation between them. And, like every other hermeneutic conversation, this will be a recognition of mutual indebtedness that will undoubtedly have a transformative character. Finally, hermeneutics forecloses any easy solution to the problem, whether it be a liberal synthesis of the two discourses, or a post-liberal entrenchment of the opposition between them. The ongoing dialogue prevents us from jumping to final conclusions.

BB: Lately you have been branching out in your application of hermeneutics. Your current project is concerned with a hermeneutics of the natural sciences.

AW: In fact, I am conducting a long term research project on the hermeneutics of medicine. I am interested in describing the implications of neuroscience on philosophical questions and our self-understanding. By emphasizing the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding a human being as a feeling human being (*fühlendes Wesen*) who needs a special care particularly at times of physical and psychological dis-ease, hermeneutics stresses the need to illuminate the understanding of human being as *existentia hermeneutica*.

My initial research on the hermeneutics of medicine is concentrated on the Nineteenth Century literature on the philosophy of medicine, which is connected with my former specialization in German Idealism. I focus on the late Schelling’s notion of illness as an illusion of life and an estrangement from nature. In his illumination of the nature of evil, Schelling refers to the similitude (*Gleichnis*) of illness: Illness imitates life but can never achieve life on its own. It is essentially parasitical. Schelling interprets illness in terms of the duality in nature, the original struggle between the opposed principles of darkness and light. In nature, the egocentric will

(*der Eigenwille*) is rooted in the dark ground, while the universal will arises from the light principle. Illness is a rupture from the whole, the effect of the ground rising above the grounded and putting the organism out of balance. This breaking up of natural unity is motivated by the will which wishes to exist for itself. It is, however, not possible for the ground to exist without the grounded: the will expressing itself in illness is as futile and as self-destructive as evil itself. An illness is nothing essential but only an illusion of life (*nur ein Scheinbild des Lebens*), a mere appearance of life (*bloß meteorische Erscheinung des Lebens*). As such it oscillates between being and non-being (*ein Schwanken zwischen Seyn und Nichtseyn*). However, it appears as something real, not merely as a *privatio*. Illness is a pseudo-life, a life of lies (*ein Leben der Lüge*). Schelling sets illness in opposition to life, and sees death as ultimately a victory over illness: “Illness is ended by death” (*Krankheit wird durch den Tod geendingt*). Death is not an end, but a transition into a more perfect state of being, which Schelling, drawing upon Swedenborg, describes as “essentification.”

I try to show how Schelling’s notion of illness is rooted in his concept of evil. With reference to Franz von Baader, Schelling interprets evil as a positive reversal of the principles of goodness. For Schelling, evil is not simply a non-being (*ein Nichtseiendes*), or weakness (*Schwäche*) or lack (*Mangel*); evil is something real. The actuality of evil is necessary for God to reveal himself and to establish the difference between God and creation. The possibility of evil is rooted in freedom: God has allowed the ground to rise up above the grounded for the sake of releasing beings from identification with himself. Sin (and by analogy illness) is a will-full repetition of this pattern, the transgression (*Übergang*) from genuine being (*eigentliches Seyn*) to non-being (*Nichtseyn*). Notwithstanding his identification of illness with evil, Schelling follows Novalis in seeing illness as ultimately an opportunity for growth, a purification and “education for life” (*Lebrjahre der Lebenskunst*), which can contribute to the “formation of the heart” (*Herzbildung*).

BB: I can understand your attraction toward the hermeneutics of medicine, having met your sister, an accomplished professor and researcher in hepatology and infectious diseases. And how does your historical study apply to medicine as it is currently practiced?

AW: I have presented a number of papers throughout the last few years at different conferences, gave lectures and conducted seminars on the various aspects of the hermeneutics of medicine. I have also conducted a number of international seminars on the hermeneutics of medicine. This initial research has convinced me that my interest in the hermeneutic understanding of medical practice is widely shared in the medical community. It seems that the present lacuna could be at least partially filled with some new impulses into redirecting the main focus of clinical research into the more complementary notion of medical care. The meaningful question of understanding the concept of care has to be asked over and over again, since every new question is placed in the horizon of the whole of the history of questioning and answering.

BB: This would imply that a hermeneutics of medicine would not be able to avoid the concrete judgments that require practical wisdom.

AW: The proposed hermeneutics of medicine can be seen as an alternative to applied medical ethics. The idea of the hermeneutics of medicine is motivated by the necessity to broaden the theoretical framework for medical ethics. Thus, the heart of (medical) hermeneutics can also be viewed as a critique of applied (medical) ethics. The idea that ethical principles can somehow be applied to the clinical situation by health-care personnel is strongly countered by the reference to practical wisdom (*phronesis*), since Aristotle's main purpose in developing this concept is that the application of abstract principles in the field of practical, ethical knowledge is insufficient. Indeed, the appropriation of *phronesis* can be taken as a critique of the idea that the profession of bioethics is at all possible, if bioethicist is taken to mean a person who has specialized, theoretical knowledge in medical ethics, knowledge that is not based on practical experience. Medical ethics cannot only be theoretical, it must be phronetic. We cannot be satisfied with some practical solutions regarding the medical procedures, which often give a sense of having a strong philosophical and theological foundation for medicine. Those theoretical considerations can only serve as practical manuals with the main focus on the question of "how" to successfully deal with a concrete situation, which is undoubtedly related to the major trends in understanding science in the technological age. My project on the hermeneutics of medicine goes beyond the philosophical background of medical practice. The apparent success of the dominating conception of applied ethics has separated medical ethics from philosophy and theology.

BB: This sounds very classical, very Aristotelean. What does contemporary hermeneutics have to offer this issue?

AW: Gadamer's writing on the issues of contemporary medicine and health care helps us to thematize the understanding of health in the scientific and technological age. Gadamer shares Heidegger's critique of modern scientific technology as calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*) within the horizon of calculation and manipulation in opposition to meditative thinking (*besinnliches Denken*). What is essential in the hermeneutics of medicine is the mutual seeking of understanding of the matter of health and illness by showing devastating consequences of technological thinking in medicine, which makes medicine unable to address adequately the health problems, not as the separated psycho-physiological phenomena, but as the problem regarding the whole suffering person. Hermeneutics can contribute to the reorientation of contemporary medicine as focused on fixing a medical problem—*re-paratio* in the sense of making something ready to function again (*paratio*). In that horizon the patient is treated impersonally as a case, which needs to be fixed. The dialogue as used in medical practice is hermeneutically speaking not a true conversation. The doctor strategically engages the patient in a

dialogue to get to know the patient and be able to manipulate according to the doctor's understanding of the good of the patient. Therefore, this asymmetrical dialogue is not motivated by seeking the truth of the matter at hand together with the patient.

BB: This sounds like a very serious challenge to medicine as it is currently practiced. It looks like hermeneutics seeks to integrate medicine back into the other disciplines of the academy.

AW: From the very beginning of the institution of the university in the Middle Ages the faculties of jurisprudence, philosophy, and theology were entrusted with the study of human beings in their totality. One of the major missions of the university was the encouragement and assistance in the search for truth and the task of keeping the sensitivity to truth alive. The university can fulfill its mission only when it serves truth, and by serving truth it serves the human being. Throughout the history of the university the question about its own mission has been asked and found its answer in the particular constraints of time and place. When we ask this question again today we are conscious that the answer we get can only be understood as an invitation to dwell in the horizon of all preceding questions and answers. Our task is to remain on the way to truth.

When we ask about the relationship between philosophy, theology, and the medical sciences, we can again see hermeneutics as this "between." Those disciplines cannot be totally separated from the other and, nevertheless, each must preserve its proper task and proper identity. Especially the health sciences must readdress the question of their own methodology, and, in particular, the question of the criterion of validity, which is largely foreign to the original understanding of medical sciences within the medieval university as the fourth faculty. It is a truly an important task to preserve the autonomy of the individual disciplines in their historical context and examine their self-understanding in the long process of searching for the truth.

BB: I recall when you first started to ask these questions, and that the language used to describe pain and suffering seemed to be the first stumbling block.

AW: One of my main focuses in elaborating the hermeneutics of medicine is the hermeneutic insight into pain and suffering. Hermeneutics no longer understands pain as a matter of nerves and neurotransmitters but as an encounter with meaning on a personal and social level, which is in need of interpretation. The personal experience of pain is an invitation to give meaning to pain, to make sense of pain. In an age of escaping from pain, working through pain (*Durcharbeiten*) is understood as a personal confrontation with meaning and as such as interpreting the self toward enrichment of personal identity. It is an invitation to give expression to the experience of pain as postulated by Malcolm in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak / Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break."

BB: In my experience, I've seen that we even lack a proper conceptual vocabulary to describe our pain. Without it, emotional suffering can manifest itself as physical pain, and be treated as a solely physical problem.

AW: The technocratic medical notion of pain invites the mechanical pharmacological treatment of pain with pills, which strips pain of its meaning. However, the meaning of pain is not something simply given, it has to be discovered and lived. The predominant tendency of the pharmacologization of pain makes the hermeneutic work toward making sense of an encounter with pain ever more urgent. There is a dramatic need of reshaping the meaning of pain, which is promoted by the technocratic understanding of medicine concentrated on making the medical treatment as tailored to a particular pain as possible. Therefore, the main attention is on the symptoms, as they can be objectified as specific to the particular medical condition. The understanding of pain and suffering is, in fact, mechanistic and naturalistic. The experience of pain is reduced to an impersonal event analyzed in accordance with the laws of the physiology of pain. Thus, pain is dis-ruption, dis-turbance, lack of health, and decrease of the quality of life. What is particularly missing in such an understanding is the whole context in which pain manifests itself. The complex question "why the pain and suffering" is not even asked. The whole existential context of the pain and suffering is missed. The attempt to see a possibility of a positive meaning of pain and suffering as an indication of a problem with the particular human being is nullified. Reducing pain to a particular medical issue leads to medicalization of pain by placing the experience of pain exclusively on the physiological level. However, pain is the experience of a human person, which needs to be seen within the whole of human person, affecting body and soul. The physiological aspect of pain needs to be paid attention to without however surrendering the experience of pain to a reductionist model of positivistic approach of the natural sciences.

Modern medicine reduces the complexity of the personal experience of pain and suffering to a decision-making process governed by a clinical examination of symptoms. In fact, the prevalent tendency of perpetuating meaninglessness of pain and reducing pain to a mere perception leads to fear of facing pain and thus promotes the fast cure with pain killers. The pharmaceutical companies are marketing pain and redefining pain as a commodity which leads to it becoming a booming business. The growing number of Pain Clinics and the epidemic of chronic pain is a clear indication that the medicalization and pharmacologization of pain is in itself a dead end and in need of an urgent radical rediscovery of the possible meaning of pain and suffering.

BB: The problem of our attitude toward pain is indeed a serious one. But what does hermeneutics have to offer in terms of a solution?

AW: Hermeneutics helps us to address some aspects of dealing with the experience of pain. One of them is the denial of pain prompted by fear of confronting the real issues of which pain is the indication, as fear of illness or knowing about the existing

medical condition, fear of losing one's self-image as a strong and healthy individual, fear of being considered a wimp (pain and gender), fear of vulnerability and fragility, etc. From the medical perspective it is important to speak of the issue of pain and rationalization, which often contributes to delay in seeking help while experiencing severe pain. An attempt to reduce down the experience of severe pain and make it into an explainable occurrence is often based on the incapacitation of the informed decision regarding the limits of discomfort and debilitation one can (or even should) accept and justify before seeking medical or other professional assistance. Pain needs to be interpreted before any professional action will be taken, therefore the importance of the ability to make a connection between pain and a medical condition and the need for knowledge and vocabulary to make medical sense of the experience of pain. The experience of fear of a serious disease might prompt an individual to surrender to pain, to attempt to normalize the discomfort, and to overcome pain. Even the escalation of pain can be used as an excuse to reappraise the actual need for help. Reluctance to seek help might be connected to the psychological need to retain control over one's own pain, to the inability of dealing with personal crises (crises management) and accepting illness as a challenge to the present life style. The particular aspects of dealing with the experience of pain and suffering stress the need for constructing and reconstructing the notion of pain. The language in which pain manifests itself makes us aware of pain *as* language, as pain which speaks (*Schmerz, der spricht*). In a climate of trust and support, the voice of pain will be heard and interpreted (as a clear countertendency to the prevalent silencing of medicine— *Verstummen der Medizin*). The dialogical nature of human being offers an insight into an economy of pain: The suffering person needs to listen to one's own pain (*auf den Schmerz hören*, also in the sense of noticing the possible medical problem) and to be listened to (by a medical professional and friends). This listening to and being listened to emphasize the insufficiency of medicalization and pharmacologization of pain.

BB: This seems to be a more holistic approach, contextualizing pain within the whole of the human experience.

AW: The contribution of hermeneutics to the rehumanization of pain and suffering and to giving meaning to the experience of pain complements the achievements of different human, social, and medical sciences, which interpret various perspectives of pain and suffering. Hermeneutics makes us aware that while uncovering what is hidden and inaccessible to the human understanding of pain and suffering, it covers others aspects up; while making some phenomena visible, it obliterates others. It reminds us that there is no singular perspective that can embrace the whole of reality. Enlarging the perspectives of interpreting pain and suffering, hermeneutics promotes a culture of openness and dialogue between peoples and cultures. Making sense of the experience of pain and suffering has a transformative character. With Gadamer we can say that reaching "an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of asserting one's own point of view, but a change into a communion in which one does

not remain what one was.” By fostering human understanding and making sense of pain and suffering, hermeneutics is a constant reminder that every experience is in need of interpretation, which is never finished, never final, always requiring reinterpretation, revision, and reformulation.

By validating the personal experiences of pain and suffering, the hermeneutic approach allows for a deeper understanding of the *lived experience*. It calls for a redefinition of what it means to be healthy and how to learn to stay healthy, and invites a serious inquiry into a personal history of a patient to search for a possible cause of pain and suffering. It takes us beyond the pattern recognition of the experience of pain and suffering as mere obstacles toward a healthy, happy, and productive life into the depths of understanding each human history in its singularity and complexity. The common experience of pain and suffering cannot be reduced to even the most advanced technical analysis of the mechanisms of psycho-physiological reaction, but calls for the “change of heart” of medical praxis: Because pain is a common experience of a suffering person, medical practice is often indifferent toward recognizing it as an important and very telling aspect of illness. It is unfortunately far too often comfortably unrecognized as problem in itself and is treated instead in an exclusive pharmacological way. We need to re-learn how to read the meaning of pain in the whole context of personal life of the suffering person in order to discover the new possibilities of an adequate medical treatment and a true healing.

BB: You use the word “healing.” Can we say that for you, the hermeneutics of medicine is concerned first and foremost with the art of healing?

AW: The discussion on the relationship between philosophy, theology, and the health sciences needs to be grounded in the medieval debate about the relationship between theory and practice, about the relation between knowing and acting. Within that realm, medicine was more an “art” than a science. Once it became an academic discipline, the art of serving the human being with regard to the physical and psychological well-being was scrutinized by the criteria of rationality: The art of healing ceased to be informed by magic and was placed under the guidance of reason. The task of healing needs to be thematized once again, since every new question is placed in the horizon of the whole of the history of questioning and answering without artificially imposing any single answer. Our hermeneutic task is not to answer the question in a definitive way, but present it as a living question with its long intellectual and practical history and a question, which bears an important role on the future of science and the whole humankind. A hermeneutic task is the dynamics of question and answer, which leads to further questions.

BB: If a hermeneutics of medicine has been your primary application, the other has surely been the hermeneutics of education.

AW: My current research project concerns the hermeneutics of education.

My hermeneutic approach to education draws on insights from Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. With special attention to the centrality of conversational reciprocity in educative process (and not so much in educative structures), I show that the task of education is the conscientious endeavor of leading a student to a certain wisdom and a complex development of the whole person. The key issue is the “formation” of the individual while fostering the intersubjective understanding, which stands in an opposition to the predominant contemporary tendency of overstressing the transfer of information and the growth of scientific knowledge. Following the ancient tradition, I critically address the issue of the limits of education: Given that “the most useful is the useless,” how the universal call for thinking compels us to transgress ourselves and transform our convictions? If the logic of question and answer is the guiding phronetic model for education, what are the conditions of possibility of dialogical education? Is education as self-education with all aspects of the possible uselessness just yet another extravaganza and an obvious burden on the social system or a rather true expression of the hermeneutic gesture of hospitality and welcoming the other as the possible disclosure of that which is yet undisclosed to us.

By its very nature, education happens always in the realm of ambiguity. Is there an a priori need to dismiss the hermeneutic approach to education as an infertile endorsement of equivocity, vagueness, fuzziness, and deceptiveness? Hermeneutics reminds us rather that the plurivocity of understanding situates the human search of meaning in the horizon of incompleteness, allowing for both, spontaneity and rigor, and always remembering that the most important in education is to understand what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing when we learn to understand.

BB: Are there any other hermeneutic projects in the works aside from medicine and education?

AW: My newest project addressed the hermeneutics of communication, addressing violent interpretations and the suffocating of the voice of the other. One of the most significant outcomes of the encounter with hermeneutics for the media sciences might be the re-articulation of methodological questions resulting from a carefully argued appeal for a change of paradigm of media sciences’ self-understanding. Research and practice in media sciences can take its bearing from the interpretive process of Gadamerian hermeneutics. In detail, such a call for reshaping the understanding of media sciences can open up possibilities of rethinking the presuppositions of media coverage. The impact of hermeneutics on media centers on thematization of the understanding of understanding. Characteristic of contemporary hermeneutics is the claim that the human being is essentially temporal: Lacking access to a God’s eye perspective, we understand texts as they can be understood given our situation in history. In such an understanding, hermeneutics is not a methodology of reading, but a new way of understanding the finite nature of being-in-the-world.

BB: This engagement of our finitude seems a likely place to apply your formulation of balancing suspicion with sympathy.

AW: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—three masters of suspicion, as Ricoeur calls them—introduce an age of interpretation. I am convinced that we must complement the hermeneutics of suspicion by the hermeneutic of sympathy, and thus overcome the binaries of sympathy versus judgment, historical objectivity versus subjective response. Based on Heidegger’s “hermeneutics of facticity” and his understanding that language is not primarily a tool for communication, but a ground of human existence, any interpretation needs to make explicit the historical and existential situation of the interpreter. With Heidegger and Derrida we can assume that all interpretation is interpretive violence to that which is interpreted, since it is inescapably bound up with situatedness, intersubjectivity, and the necessity of interpretation as constitutive elements of human being. To interpret means to address that which needs to be understood in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*: There is no understanding of a text without first understanding of the history of its genesis and reception. To address the postmodern critical distancing from the author (*mens auctoris*), as concentrating only on the text itself while quite disengaged from any of its characteristics that properly belong to a specific time, it would be necessary to open up a creative discussion about the peculiarity of interpretation as a kind of relationship between writer and reader as situated between familiarity and strangeness. The dialectic interplay between familiarity and strangeness captures something significant about understanding the hermeneutic contribution to the event of understanding, and challenges the methodological ideal of a neutral and presuppositionless access to the text. Hermeneutics reshapes the task of understanding by disclosing that any understanding is self-understanding.

BB: In the interests of bringing this full circle, can you return to your earliest theological education and retrieve from it a hermeneutic theology? What specifically theological insights inform your work now?

AW: My fundamental hermeneutic insight is the possibility of experiencing God in *different* ways. In a powerful dialectic of question and answer, we can experience a profound divine logic, which can be seen in the history of Christian dogmatics. This history can be symbolically described as a movement toward the condensation of meaning, which, in turn, calls for the decondensation in order to grasp the multiplicity of the possible perspectives just to be recapitulated again in the form of a condensed interpretation. Welcoming this circularity and clearly endorsing the plurivocity of meaning, hermeneutic theology presents itself as a philosophical reflection not only on what needs to be understood, but on the understanding of understanding. It is a philosophical deliberation on what is happening to us when we understand. Any theological reflection cannot escape the hermeneutic circle between the biblical revelation and the context in which this revelation originally came to life and still comes to life in being interpreted.

This disclosure contains an infinite depth, which corresponds to God's infinite mind. As such, it is an invitation to the infinite task of interpretation. Since the Bible is an infinite revelation, it opens up a horizon of infinite possibilities for understanding. Theological hermeneutics fully embraces those infinite possibilities for interpretation, while understanding the Christian life as a living response to the living God. In that hermeneutic horizon, we situate ourselves as the participants in a conversation in which we not only engage the other in order to be understood, but allow the subject matter, in this case Scripture, to raise questions. We can go even further by saying that in that non-methodological disclosure of divine truth we allow Scripture to question us. In our hermeneutic gesture of openness we accept the divine claim to validity and the fact that this disclosure has something to say to us with all possible consequences, including the free recognition of the imperative to change our lives.

BB: But this cannot be simply a moral imperative. There must something offered to us if this is to be theological.

AW: With the guidance of the Paraclete, the inspired disciples of Christ are empowered to understand Jesus's teaching on God in the light of the succeeding events of his personal history and the history of the lives of his followers. At Pentecost, the fact that the Apostles speak different languages does not hinder their being understood. In fact, everyone understands the message in his own tongue. It means that no individual language is able to express the whole of the "one" message, which is sent by the Holy Spirit. We need to understand this message in a variety of languages and in a variety of ways. The hermeneutic criterion for the discernment of the plurivocity of understanding comes from the effusion of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of the essentiality of the plurivocity of understanding at the Pentecost is, at the same time, the opening of the horizon of understanding. On the one hand, it is the speculative opening in the sense of getting a deeper insight into the very nature of understanding. On the other hand, it is a spacial widening of the horizon of understanding. By overcoming the historical, cultural, and religious barriers—this new outpouring of divine energy into the created world—we are reminded of the universality of hermeneutics. It is, in its essence, the call to understanding.

As a sign of the awareness of the interpretative task of the Christian community in her *statu missionis*, the "tongue" presents truth and love of God. Therefore, language receives in the event of Pentecost a new dimension as a communicative tool in truth and love. Thinking, speaking, and acting of people filled with the Holy Spirit contribute to the edification of their real community as the visible sign of overcoming the symbolic historical impediments from the Tower of Babel. Language is not only the tool of communication between people talking to each other and understanding the diverse dialects, but becomes the mode of communication with God. As a house of God, language is the house of a human being, invited by the Spirit to participation in the inner life of Trinity. We could say that the Holy Spirit is the language we speak and truly *are*. With the invitation to the

life in God, we can understand Trinity from now on as our homeland. And the Holy Spirit as God's Spirit of Truth and Love is our mother tongue. In Polish, we call the first language we speak not a mother tongue (*lingua materna*), but native language (*język ojczysty*, *lingua patria*, *lingua paterna*, which can be traced back to Cicero's *sermo patria*). Within this Trinitarian paradigm, we can share our new homeland with everyone, and yet speak our own language while being understood by others.

BB: But this leads to the obvious question of just how public this discourse can be. In an increasingly secular age, is this really the kind of language that can be used in a discussion that seeks to be interdisciplinary?

AW: When some 50 years ago, Andre Malraux, proclaimed: "*le vingt-et-unieme siecle sera religieux ou ne sera pas*," many who believed that secularism is the wave of the future could not really understand what it could mean that religion will be the measure of humanity in the Twenty First Century. In the closing decades of the Twentieth Century, we have witnessed the global resurgence of religions around the world despite modernization, secularization, and globalization. However, this upsurge in religion has also definitely contributed to an increasing number of violent conflicts around the globe. Ten years after September 11, 2001 it seems impossible to neglect religion and the role it plays in the contemporary international affairs. The recent revival of religion calls us to re-question the idea of secular society as fairer and freer for everybody. The prevalent idea that modernity means a secular modernity, confines religion to a private space of individual morality, separate from a public sphere of politics. The return of religion drives us to ask whether it is hermeneutically possible to separate religious matters from the running of government.

Personally, I welcome any opportunity to deal with the burning issues of the relationship between religion and politics and to develop fresh thinking on the articulation of religion and politics in the contemporary world. As a philosopher and theologian, I address the question of the conceptualization of the non-conceptual in order to critically analyze what happens when we make the divine an object of thought (Heidegger). Since even our recent history demonstrates dramatically that a human being does not live by reason alone, and that we cannot stop searching for convincing answers to life's fundamental questions, I hope to be able to offer an intellectual platform to address the relationship between politics and religion beyond established answers of secular science and philosophy.

BB: In the increasing static of our electronic and virtual age, it seems important to rethink, and so not lose, our capacity to live reflective lives.

AW: Thinking independently calls for relentless perseverance in the effort to understand, complementing all preceding notions and only slowly approximating one's own. Conscious of being always a beginner, and yet setting in motion a thoughtful dialogue with the tradition, I have to deal with the possibility of serious

shortcomings. But, with Heidegger I can say: “Thinkers learn from their shortcomings to be more persevering.” I hope that my continuing education and academic work demonstrate such perseverance.

In “The Word of Nietzsche,” Heidegger says: “We show respect for a thinker only when we think. This demands that we think everything essential that is thought in his thought.” This recurring motif of honoring a thinker by addressing the matter to be thought sets the standard for hermeneutic interpretation. Following Heidegger, it is necessary to pay particular attention to what a thinker left unsaid in what he said. But the essential part of every interpretation is to rethink the matter itself. Therefore, my work thrives best at the intersection of critical thinking, historical scholarship, and personal commitment. Since complex and subtle thinking requires complex and subtle ways of expressing oneself, my linguistically oriented hermeneutics calls for a particular re-reading of the perennial tradition of the philosophy with the special attention to the power and powerlessness of language not only in the context of the academic inquiry into the nature of language, but also in an often dramatic or even tragic confrontation with the political and religious powers striving to suppress or undermine a certain language or linguistic expression of cultural, political, and religious diversity.

BB: We discussed that one of your current applications of hermeneutics is to education. Let us take a further step of application: How do you appropriate this into your own approach to teaching?

AW: In terms of the life of the academic community, my mandate is to live the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a particular university by building on the past and current strength of its members and bringing my own vision, leadership, experience, and enthusiasm to reinterpret the understanding of the higher education within the confines of the given academic system. My experience in attracting research grant support in collaboration with international colleagues can be of the great service to the long-term evolution of the existing structures within the university. By fostering the further development of students at different academic levels, we can together ensure the prosperity of the university in the Twenty First Century. The particular emphasis on the academic planning and strategic development of academic curricula at the university and on the national and international level has been my major concern regarding the future of academic education. Therefore, creative and constructive interacting with fellow colleagues and students at all levels is the forefront of my insights and activities while contributing to the broadening the strategic development of the university education. My experience in working with international scholars helps me to deepen an understanding of diverse dynamics pertaining to building intellectual and personal community among ethnically diverse faculty and students. Facilitating direct academic collaboration among faculty and students beyond administrative formalities is one of my main concerns.

Organizing conferences, giving paper presentations, invited speakers, guest lectures, and keynote addresses at the congresses and colloquia has been the center of

my academic task. Although the main accent in my Curriculum has been on my own research and facilitating international academic exchange, directing individual hermeneutic projects and teaching have always been an important part of my academic journey. In your own recent book, *Paul Ricoeur between Theology and Philosophy* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, Ind., 2010), you thank me for being “the very definition of hospitality, both physical and intellectual,” and for helping you “for a decade in developing the courage to think the necessary.” This lovely acknowledgment eloquently summarizes my understanding of the essence of education, which by helping others to reach their own potential in thinking the necessary is always also a self-education. By deferring meaning and altering its address, it is a gift, which gives itself and holds itself back.

My personal commitment to education within the existing academic structures is complemented by engaging students beyond the walls of the traditional classroom. For me, education is about a transformation of personal life in an interpersonal engagement. It is not so much a question of us transforming some aspects of our life, but of letting ourselves be transformed. While getting involved in personal lives of students, I strive to make studying meaningful for us. Not only do we together advance in understanding what needs to be understood, but our connection and intellectual friendship transform us. Essential to me is that the transformation happens in me and my students alike. It is this depth of engagement with reality (and not just with a particular subject), which transforms and forms us as human beings.

I have applied this teaching philosophy at various international universities in different capacities, from being a teaching assistant in Germany in the late 1980s through various teaching engagements in the USA and Canada to the recent position of a *Privatdozent* and Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Freiburg since 2007.

BB: It seems to me that these experiences in turn could not help but inform your research.

AW: My research interests converge on a fundamental conviction that contemporary education is international and interdisciplinary. *L'homme capable* does not pursue a path dictated by partisan academic convenience but is a vocation to be a hospitable agent, a person to welcome the other person and intellectual tradition with efficiency and prudence.

Given the disillusionment with educational success as measured by the contemporary politics of teaching to the test as a measure of success for student and teacher alike, we are encouraged not to surrender to the tyranny of calculative thinking in education. Teaching for passing the tests does not only kill genuine thinking as such but perverts education to global demagoguery of tactic how to pass the screening, at the end leaving all involved disenchanted and tired of manipulative practice.

The cybernetic world of contemporary digital culture can be a road to a true discovery of the meaning of life, a task which nobody can perform for us. We cannot be intimidated by the parasitic temptations of the educational systems depreciating original thinking to arbitrary repetition of information, but need to commit to the task of thinking.

BB: What specifically are the problems that you think could be addressed?

AW: This temptation is solidified by the great textbooks and the overwhelming love for them. Students and teachers alike are enchanted by great compendia, which serve as an introduction to an individual discipline or particular topic. The problem with textbooks is not that they are not helpful, but that in the academic practice they *replace* engagement with the sources and original problems. They also give a sense of false security that the engagement with the problem is “objectively” recognized by the experts. The dictionaries, encyclopedias, and internet, instead of being treated as the sources of information to be consulted, are often understood as the final statement on the matter, which does not call for any further critical investigation.

Just recently I made an experiment. I read a detailed summary of a novel published on the internet and tried to pass the test as required by one of the Departments of Literature. I not only passed the test, I scored 100%. I have to admit that I seriously doubt that I could achieve such a result only by reading the novel itself. After 720 pages, you do not necessarily effectively remember all the details, which are precisely emphasized in the great summary you can read online in a fraction of time. But I would still encourage everybody to take time and let oneself be mesmerized by the *Magic Mountain*, even if you don't share with me the fascination for skiing in Davos. It can happen to every one of us that we, as the young Hans Castorp, who comes the long way from Hamburg to Davos for a short visit of his cousin Joachim at the International Sanatorium Berghof and ends up staying there for seven years, might go for a journey, which will take us somewhere we do not really expect. What we learn in life is to understand that everything can be seen and expressed differently. Just as Hans Castorp changed his perspectives on life on the way from being a visitor and observer to a long-term patient, we too might modify our understanding by repositioning ourselves in our existential horizon and discovering a new approach to understanding ourselves as human beings in our singularity, vulnerability, and indispensability.

BB: So would you advise the student to read the whole book, and avoid the summaries? That seems dangerous!

AW: How could I advise someone who has a limited amount of time, but has to pass the test? Is it responsible to encourage someone to go through the whole novel and fail the test? The test questions are so specific! I'm honestly not sure who prepares such tests and why. Most of us academics are so blindly complying with rules. I still vividly remember my first exam with Prof. Bartnik in Lublin. I was 20 years old. The

question regarded the theory of evolution. He asked me to name seven different interpretations. I believe I was talking about the fourth and he stopped me saying that it was brilliant, and he would not remember more than three without looking into his notes. I might have slightly reinterpreted the details, but this is how I remember this exam. And I have to admit that whenever I serve as an examiner to this day, I still think of this memorable event. There are many ways to impress me, but memorizing all the details is definitely not one of them.

BB: But what about the textbooks?

AW: Unfortunately, it is not only academia that is crazy about the textbooks. Think only of all those self-help manuals. How many patients before even seeing a doctor torture themselves with the overflow of information on their factual or imagined condition? And more, we have YOUCAT, using “the traditional question and answer format.” Wow! You have a question, I have an answer! And on top of everything this approach pretends to “reliably present the Catholic faith.”

Any summaries of intellectual, religious, and cultural traditions give the illusion of presenting us with quick answers to primordial questions. They create the impression of feeling omnipotent, knowing everything essential. And their enthusiasts boast in helping people to live illuminated life in our fast paced global environment. But is it a real help? An encouragement to think through? To see the ambiguities and problems without rushing for a quick conclusion? All those questions are posed in the context of living life, but also waiting for death and looking beyond death. Here we see clearly how the persistence and the new arrival of the question of God differ yet complement each other. What is here at stake is to remain in con-versation (which is also always a con-version in turning face to the other). What will change is maybe the intensity of con-versations we are involved in with great urgency to address the question of the meaning of life and the gift of death. We might fall into silence with the other. Eternal personal conversation with God will be the continuation of the conversation that we are, that we fall into. It will be just another version (con-version) of engagement, the beginning of eternal movement without the restrictions of time and space. Eternity is not a pure nothingness; rather it is an absolute intensity of engagement. This notion of eternity challenges also our notion of death, encouraging to think beyond a dis-aster (δυσ-ἀστήρ, a bad star, one which is destructed); thus presenting mortality and death as a gift. We know about it from a disclosure in the mystery of Trinity, and we can already marvel at this undivided attention to the other, which is also our history and our promise in the signature of the divine. It is a transformation from a passive listener to a witness, who listens by commemorating the past and looking forward to the future. This is what the unhesitating faith is all about.

BB: Given that hermeneutics is so central to your understanding of both the problems and potential solutions, I'd like to give you one last chance to advocate for the importance of hermeneutics.

AW: Hermeneutics is for me not only the art of thinking, but the art of living. Hermeneutics does not help us to learn quickly, especially through acquiring speedy and efficient reading techniques, since it profoundly values the process of reaching understanding in its entirety. Therefore, on the contrary, it requests from us that we return to the text again and again, reading line by line, and familiarize ourselves with everything we can discover in the task of deciphering the text. Reading between lines, understanding *the unsaid* belongs to the interpretation and understanding as much as the more verifiable and objectifiable rules of methodological interpretation of literary texts. Being entrusted with all that is unfamiliar, hermeneutics encourages us to dedicate our life to all that which strikes us as significant.

Neither will hermeneutics help us much in making quick smart moral decisions as the person well trained in ethical theory and experienced in passing applicable moral judgments. On the contrary, it will rather ask us to consider the variety of views and positions, not blindly trusting the established rules, regulations, and rubrics. This is not happening for the sheer pleasure of entertaining the diversity of opinions, but because of the essential conviction that the other might be right in terms of his understanding, his motifs, and his fundamental option for life (*optio fundamentalis*). Hermeneutic inclination to moderation, to undecidability is not an invitation to complacency, but rather it means that we have questions. If we do not expect variety of different answers to our question, we have not really asked. What is essential is to have questions, to see questions. This means that when we genuinely ask we cannot expect any particular answer. In fact, we should exercise ourselves in anticipating the unexpected, in welcoming the unknown, unfamiliar, and inexplicable. This can lead to opening our horizon to the strange and challenging by not attempting to domesticate it, but accepting it as a radical challenge to our own understanding and the way of life.

Hermeneutics will also not necessarily help us to be joyful. Rather it will encourage us to accept pain in our life: Learning through suffering—*πάθει μάθος*. It will, against most successful psychological theories and manuals, emphasize that, as a human being, we become wise not through mere accumulation of life experience, not through avoiding problems, distress, and dis-ease, but through pain and suffering. The truth of experience always relates this particular experience to yet another experience. Therefore, as Gadamer reminds us, the experienced person, *φρόνιμος*, the wise person, is not experienced by just being exposed to different experiences and having accumulated even the most impressive amount of the variety of experiences. Rather, and far more important, is the person's openness toward new experience. Therefore, and it is quite in an opposition to the present social admiration of an expert, the wise person is exactly the insecure, the undecided, and the doubting. In a clear contradiction to an expert, who knows and understands, and can easily judge what is right, the experienced person is rather radically undogmatic, uncertain, and indeterminate. And this is not because of psychological insecurity, timidity, and fear of being wrong. The experienced person is fundamentally ambiguous precisely because of the existential experience that it is essential to be open to new experience.

This is not for the sake of intellectual or moral curiosity, but because it is the openness to new experience, which makes a human being a real *φρόνιμος*. Thus, hermeneutics embraces ambiguity by resisting the urge to suggest authoritative readings of life. Instead of offering easy reconciliations of conflicting and irresolvable interpretations, hermeneutics, by emphasizing the ambiguous nature of interpretation, invites human beings to discover themselves as historical, finite, and lingual beings, and thus profoundly engage with everything what needs to be understood.

BB: So we must learn to live in the tension of this ambiguity?

AW: If art is, in fact, the highest source of education, what is particularly relevant is the ambiguity of art. It is precisely the ambiguity, which makes human creation into art. By embracing ambiguity, hermeneutics restores life to its original difficulty. Hermeneutics values the complexity of the task of interpretation and requires that reading the same text, which presents itself to us in different ways, we always apply the text to ourselves. Hermeneutics resists the idea that there can be one single authoritative reading of a text that is correct in itself. Therefore, to understand means to live in the horizon of question and answer opened to possible meanings, which cannot be petrified in univocal statements.

This ambiguity is the main enemy of the expert mentality. A parent is not necessarily in a possession of a better answer as a child, respectively doctor/patient, teacher/student. The true wisdom of life is to search for an understanding *together* with the other while turning toward the matter which calls for understanding.

BB: So you see hermeneutics as way of inoculating us against experts?

AW: It is not only that the experts (parents, teachers, doctors, priests) impose on us their understanding. In fact, very often we welcome this imposition, or even more, we impose on the experts to provide us with their final answer. And if we don't get what we want, we move to yet another expert. Like with a plastic surgeon, who instead of performing the requested operation encourages a patient to look into oneself for possible other problems and explains that the surgical procedure might not solve the problem one has with one's self-acceptance. Not rarely, will the patient go out and instead of facing oneself will face a doctor in the office round the corner who will perform the expected surgery at 20% discount.

Just recently, a friend of mine, a celebrity and a professor of philosophy himself, suffered a severe heart attack. Three professors of cardiology were talking at his bed about the possible surgical procedures. He told me that listening to this conversation was one of the most difficult experiences in his life. Knowing how serious was his medical condition, he couldn't stand the idea that they really *don't know* what to do. There were three different opinions. And he really wished that they would just communicate to him what is best for him. Obviously, he very well understood that not knowing of their doubts would not change reality. But to listen to the contradicting opinions in matter of life and death was too much for him at the

moment. Fear and flight from oneself are not the characteristics of inauthenticity in a moralistic sense, but something belonging to the human nature. In this context we can recall again Heidegger's *Weg-sein*, the primordial flight from oneself to make life easier.

BB: The task you describe seems much easier said than done. It would be an arduous task to cultivate such a disposition.

AW: Here, I think, is the major task of education. To teach us to live in the horizon of proximity, to accept actual challenges of life as they present themselves, without necessarily looking for them. This is the true challenge (*Heraus-forderung*) of education and living one's own life as a permanent self-education. Here again patient endurance is requested.

It is always possible to think that there is a better way of understanding something, and of handling as well. We could spend our life deliberating on the possibilities without being able to do something. Hermeneutics calls us to action. We have to speak, to translate, to handle, without ever forgetting that every our action remains in the horizon of proximity and incompleteness. We must risk! And as Ricoeur says the best way of improving an existing translation is to translate it again. Without the already existing translation there is nothing to be improved, nothing to be measured against.

BB: What then about ordinary life? How does this apply to our families and communities? There is a natural desire to resolve ambiguities; we crave stability and order. There will always be that tendency to scapegoat, to cleanse the rebel from our midst.

AW: We live in the world of formalized responsibility. The perfected policies become the hysteric obsession of the globalized societies and organizations. Even many churches fall willingly into this paranoia. "Cleaning up" becomes the standard practice and the highest measure of transparency and compliance with the regulations. The acclaimed method of this "cleaning up" is eliminating the problem, possibly even before it might arrive. Therefore, we concentrate on screening, and extensive scrutiny, hoping that we eradicate all problems. But what we in fact do, is the elimination of real responsibility. We see this clearly in medicine. Introducing the extensive policies kills the willingness on the side of a doctor to engage in anything, what is not yet standardized or recommended. We train people to stay on the safe side. Instead of facing the other, and engaging the other with radical responsibility, we remain within the realm of the safe. This radical responsibility means that I have to do something what nobody can do for me. In many instances, it is virtually impossible to justify in a formal sense my personal reasoning for action. What is essential here is the fact that there *is* reasoning for my action, but under the circumstances this reasoning might not be obvious to other and they might not share it with me. This is what I call hermeneutic rationality.

Similarly, we cannot just screen and eliminate people who might cause future problems. The task of education is to help people grow and not to fit into the expected frame. To grow means to dis-cover, to over-come the temptation of living an easy life of complacency and indifference. Education is not about moralizing and patronizing, but facing the human person in its complexity, accepting in love, and going together through life without excluding anything human. Ambiguity is not indifference.

BB: Thank you very much for taking the time to talk about this. Do you have any closing remarks, perhaps on the importance of hermeneutics?

AW: Hermeneutics is not a key to a quick existential and professional success. However, by following understanding that the fullness of experience is not the fullness of information or scientific knowledge, but the radical openness to new experience, I can happily endorse hermeneutics as the way of learning and living meaningful life. There is obviously much more that could be added, but as Gadamer said, it would be a poor hermeneutician that believes one can have or must have the final word. Let the conversation continue!